

# Turning Around Schools: A View From the Superintendent / Central Office as Policy Implementers

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# BOSTON COLLEGE

## Lynch School of Education

Department of  
Educational Leadership and Higher Education

Professional School Administrator Program (PSAP)

### TURNING AROUND SCHOOLS: A VIEW FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT / CENTRAL OFFICE AS POLICY IMPLEMENTERS

A single case study which examines how turnaround policy implementation  
is influenced by policy sense-making

Dissertation in Practice  
by

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submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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**TURNING AROUND SCHOOLS:  
A VIEW FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT AND CENTRAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATORS AS  
POLICY IMPLEMENTERS**

*A single case study which examines how turnaround policy implementation is influenced by policy sense-making*

by

Charles A. Grandson IV

Dr. Rebecca Lowenhaupt, dissertation chair

**Abstract**

This single case study examines how stakeholders of a local education agency (LEA) understand and implement state turnaround policy for its chronically underperforming schools. While there is ample research on how to improve chronically underperforming schools, a research gap exists specifically around addressing implementation of mandated turnaround policy. This qualitative study uses the theory frame of policy sense-making to identify how implementers come to understand turnaround policy and to explore how that sense-making impacts their implementation decisions.

This study seeks to understand the role of central office in turnaround policy sense-making by collecting data on superintendent and central office administrator sense-making and its impact on policy implementation. While recent research on school improvement has focused on school improvement actions and responsibilities of principals and teachers, this study seeks to address the research gap of the essential role of school district offices in school turnaround. In seeking to understand how district

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leaders make sense of turnaround policy implementation to support school turnaround, the findings revealed that the superintendent and central office administrators identified strong superintendent leadership, monitoring and supporting schools, strategic distribution of resources, and management of human capital as key implementer actions and areas of influence.

# TURNING AROUND SCHOOLS: A VIEW FROM POLICY IMPLEMENTERS

A single case study which examines how turnaround policy implementation is influenced by policy sense-making.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**  
DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE  
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## TURNING AROUND SCHOOLS: A VIEW FROM IMPLEMENTERS

Research conducted and report produced in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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## CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Improving chronically underperforming schools has been identified as one of the nation's top priorities. Reforming schools has required not only a significant investment of federal, state and community tax dollars but has also served as a lightning rod for issues of accountability and equity for underserved students. The successful implementation of education reform policies leading to “turning around” schools or the entire Local Education Agency (LEA) can significantly influence student lives.

Raising student achievement is the goal of education reform policy implementation, but implementing school reform policy, is a complex and multi-layered endeavor that involves multiple stakeholders. As the consequences for failing to meet state driven accountability measures increases, it is critical that LEA leaders and communities understand how to navigate successfully from policy intent to policy implementation in the local context. Data from this study can inform leaders as to where potential gaps exist and how to develop strategies to accomplish the stated goals.

This research examined how multiple stakeholder groups in a LEA viewed their roles in the implementation of turnaround policies. Additionally, the research examined what factors influenced policy implementer understanding. The implementer groups studied included; school board members, superintendent/central office personnel, building leaders and teachers.

The LEA in this study is a semi-urban school system serving ten-thousand students who represent an increasingly diverse population. The community is challenged by high unemployment, poverty, limited local financial resources to support education and a LEA that is precariously balanced between maintaining local control of its schools or risk takeover by a state entity. During the time of this study, the LEA



was engaged in an aggressive campaign to turnaround its most recently designated underperforming schools and was under state mandate to address the growing student achievement gap. The LEA had successfully turned around two of its schools in the last year and was about to embark on a planning process to develop a strategy for turning around another underperforming school.

LEA leadership had identified a few important strategies that it felt were needed to turnaround a failing school based on previous turnaround experiences. Many of those strategies had been implemented after the school had been designated by the state as underperforming. The superintendent/central office staff, teachers, school leaders and school board members each had policy roles in turning around schools in the LEA. Through interviews, document analysis, and observations of meetings these interwoven studies examined how each implementer group understood their role and whether their understanding ultimately affected implementation of the policy itself.

The study focused the initial research on four key areas. It first examined the current legislation and the process for designating underperforming schools. Then the study examined research on the characteristics of underperforming schools and effective turnaround practices. Researchers reviewed the current literature on policy implementation and identified sense-making as a theoretical lens and finally, reviewed the literature for internal and external factors that might affect policy sense-making.

As the researchers assessed and analyzed the study data, several ideas began to emerge. Factors such as role definition, data, communication, resources, context, culture, trust, social and political capital all contribute to how implementers go about the business of making sense of what they are being asked to do. The results of this study are intended to offer guidance and recommendations to the LEA and community leaders who are responsible for implementing turnaround policies. This study is also intended to add to the theoretical and practical research literature on

how turnaround policies are implemented in the local context and what factors influence local implementers.

### RESEARCH

#### SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS, POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AND SENSE MAKING

In reviewing the literature, researchers explored the intersection between chronically underperforming schools, turnaround policy intent, policy implementation and the overarching factors that influence implementers as they create meaning in turnaround situations.

The researchers began by looking at the literature that examines how turnaround schools are defined by Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahn & Tallant (2010) and then related it to the work of Murphy & Meyers (2008) Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, Levy & Saunders, (2005), Corallo & McDonald (2001), Gezi (1990) and Clubine, Knight, Schnieider & Smith (2001) on the challenging conditions that contribute to chronically underperforming schools such as poverty, stress, student mobility, low parent involvement and poor home-school collaborations. The strengths or weaknesses of leadership, teacher quality and teacher morale were also cited as factors in chronically underperforming schools. To examine these concepts further, researchers reviewed the work of Fullan (2006), Hargreaves (2004), Leithwood (2010) Murphy & Meyers (2008) and McQuillan & Salomon-Fernandez (2008).

Turning around schools requires knowing not only what contributes negatively to underperforming schools but also identifying the conditions that contribute positively to creating an effective school environment. The research of Mintrop (2004), and Bryk et.al, (2010) speaks to the importance of shared vision, goals and shared values as one way in which to improve schools.

The purpose of our research was to examine how specific state legislation, which outlines policy requirements for school turnaround, is put into practice by

identified implementers. To understand the theoretical framework behind policy implementation research we turned to a review of the work of researchers who argue that successful policy implementation of systemic reform is complex and may be influenced by the politics of the policy adoption, how the policy problem is framed and even the language and symbols used to communicate the intent of the policy (Hess, 1999; Honig, 2006; Malen, 2006; McLaughlin, 2006; Hill, 2006, Smylie & Evans, 2006). To provide a theoretical construct for understanding how individual policy implementers understand and interpret policies and their intended meaning, what the study will define as “sense-making,” the researchers referred to the work of Weick (1995) and Honig et. al, (2006).

## METHODOLOGY

This research examined how turnaround work is implemented according to the state turnaround legislation. Looking at the research questions through a single case study design, the research team was able to gain a deeper understanding of how each stakeholder group made sense of the turnaround policy and how that sense-making influenced their decisions and actions around policy implementation. The LEA selected was one that had already been engaged in the process of implementing turnaround policy, with at least one level D school in the LEA, and with participation in the turnaround work by the four implementer groups that were the focus of this study, school board, superintendent/central office, school leadership and teachers. In this LEA, there are total of 16 schools (with one school closed in spring 2013). In addition to the one high school, there are nine elementary schools, three middle schools, one pre-K through grade 7 school, one therapeutic high school, and one therapeutic middle school. The LEA is considered a Level D district by the state, a designation that resulted from one or more schools in the LEA failing to meet student achievement goals relative to student performance on the state assessment system.

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Presently there are four level A schools, one level B school, seven level C schools and one level D school.

Once the LEA was selected, the research team utilized several data collection tools in order to have multiple sources of data and use triangulation in our analysis (Yin, 2009). These included observations, document review, and interviews. Participants were selected purposefully for interviews based on their participation in turnaround policy implementation (Creswell, 2012). Teachers came from level D schools and school leaders came from level C as well as level D schools. Participants also included the superintendent, central office personnel and school board members. This participant sampling allowed the research team to gather data from each of the four implementer groups.

Once data was collected, the team coded and analyzed to look for themes. Using Dedoose coding software, the team coded the interviews, both collaboratively, for the purposes of calibration, and individually (Hill, et. al, 1997). Codes were modified as part of the coding process and as suggested by the data. From there, each of the research team members identified the major themes for their implementer group. That was followed by an analysis of the themes across the implementer groups that led to recommendations for the district. Below summarizes these themes and recommendations.

## FINDINGS

### SCHOOL LEADERS

The findings in this study show that there are influences on school leaders' sense-making and that this sense-making occurs primarily around three areas, policy requirements, diagnosis, and effective practice. This sense-making then leads school

leaders to exercise specific strategies and leadership moves when they take on the tasks of turning around a chronically underperforming school.

Sense-making begins with the elements that influence school leaders' understanding of the turnaround policy and process. There were three primary influences on sense-making, which led to implementation decisions: 1) previous experience, which generated background knowledge around school turnaround, 2) communication with other stakeholders and implementers, and 3) consideration of school context all factored into how school leaders understood the policy. Each one of these influences impacted specific areas of sense-making.

Table 1: The Relationship Between Sense-making Influences and Areas and Implementation Decisions

Influences on Sense-making	Areas of Sense-making	Implementation Decisions
Communication →	Policy Requirements [1. What does the policy say about staffing and resources?]	→ Organize Staff Utilize Resources
Communication → School Context	Diagnosis [2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the school?]	→ Use Data to Diagnose
Communication → Background Knowledge	Effective Practices [3. What practice will leverage strengths and address weaknesses?]	→ Focus on Instruction Communicate a Vision Build Capacity

Working in tandem with each other, these three influences shaped how school leaders thought about their current turnaround situation. Context had a role in the diagnosis of the school. Previous experience had a role in decisions about practices that would be effective in targeting the needs of the school. Communication was the one influence that impacted all areas of sense-making as school leaders were able to hear input from other stakeholders and implementers. Table 1 shows the relationship between the influences on sense-making, the areas of sense-making and the implementation decisions. With each of the areas of sense-making there were key questions that school leaders asked. This table depicts the questions in a certain order. While there is not necessarily a clean division between each of these questions in terms of their order, generally, school leaders asked about the policy requirements early on in the process. Questions about the school's strengths and weaknesses then quickly followed. Once diagnosis was underway, they then began to look at the effective practices for turnaround implementation. These then led to a range of implementation decisions and actions.

These implementation actions aligned with specific areas of sense-making. From the questions about policy requirements came decisions about how to organize staff and utilize resources. Staffing decisions occurred relative to the staffing authority afforded by the regulations to move staff in and out of the building. Yet, school leaders that did not have that authority, often looked to reorganizing positions or repositioning staff members to put people in places that would maximize their strengths. Similarly, decisions about how to use resources were made based on what became available through level D designation. School leaders who received additional funding, used it to implement programs such as ELT and wraparound. However, schools that did not have additional funding focused their school improvement on the practices that could be implemented despite a dearth of resources. In this way, resources were not only a question of what is available, but also about how best to use what is there.

The process of diagnosing the school for its strengths and weaknesses led school leaders to make data use a critical part of turnaround. In fact, the prevalence of data in sense-making and implementation of turnaround is notable. It was at the crux of school diagnosis, it helped school leaders explain to their staffs the criteria of designation as outlined in the policy, and it became a significant part of implementation as school leaders put data at the forefront of teaching and learning in their buildings. Data was a driving force in efforts to improve schools in this LEA as it guided how implementers changed their practice, and elements of sense-making and implementation stemmed from how school leaders interpreted the data.

Finally, questions about what practices would effectively move the school forward led to implementation decisions to focus on instruction, communicate a vision, and build capacity. These actions stemmed from two key areas: diagnosis of the school and background knowledge. The diagnosis highlighted the areas on which to focus improvements and to identify practices to target those areas. Background knowledge was applicable particularly where school leaders had turnaround experience. They often entered into new turnaround situations already with a body of knowledge about effective practices from which to draw. In this LEA, the school leaders saw that these three implementation actions, focusing on instruction, communicating a vision and building capacity, would prove to be effective in raising student achievement in their schools.

The influences of communication, background knowledge, and context had key roles in how school leaders made sense of their turnaround work. They shaped how school leaders viewed their schools, how they understood what the turnaround work would entail, and how they decided the steps needed to develop a school that is a place that facilitates learning among its students. For school leaders approaching turnaround work, they should leverage these influences to push their thinking around diagnosing and identifying effective ways to raise school performance.

## TEACHERS

Findings in the teacher study not only fit nicely with the literature written about turnaround work in general, but went further and drilled into those general findings to provide much more specific recommendations for practitioners.

The first finding from the literature had to do with the importance of creating a shared vision at the school needing turnaround. Teachers are the most important resource in turnaround (Murphy & Meyers, 2008) and the most important thing a school leader needs to do with all the teachers and other administrators in their building is to clearly articulate a shared vision of how the turnaround will happen. Successful leaders in low-performing schools drive the work at hand by communicating and maintaining a highly focused vision and mission that is about student learning (Clubine, et al., 2001; Duke, 2006; Gezi, 1990; Jacobson, Johnson, Ylmaki, & Giles, 2005; Leithwood, Harris & Strauss, 2010; Murphy, 2010; Murphy & Meyers, 2008; Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2002; Potter, Reynolds, & Chapman, 2002; Salmonowicz, 2009; Duke et al., 2005). The finding of this particular study showed that for teachers it was very clear that this vision had to come from the building principal, it needed to come at the very beginning of the turnaround process and it very likely needed to happen with the help of involuntarily transferring teachers who were not on board with the vision out of the building.

The creation of a shared vision by changing the staff of a building until all the teachers were on board with the principal was a very precise description from the teachers of the first step in the turnaround process at both the turned around school and the newly designated one. This first step was necessarily described by teachers from both schools and members of the central office as being directive in nature.

They talked with great passion and detail about the reassignment process as a part

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of getting the staff in place that could and would do the work leaders saw as necessary for turnaround. At the turned around school, teachers described the principal of the beginning stage of turnaround as “her way or the highway” and went on to say that if people didn’t do what that principal said she would make their life a “living hell” until they either did change or left. Another teacher described a second principal she had worked for at another turnaround elementary school in the city as someone who, “... got what she want(ed) by throwing keys in meetings, slamming books against the wall, flipping over chairs.” Two of the three turnaround principals referenced in this study were described as having this type of intimidating and strict control at the start of the process. There was no distribution of leadership during this stage of the process.

A second stage of the turnaround process for the teachers of these schools also fits with one of the second recommendations that came out of the literature review that centered on the building of teacher capacity through professional development. Richard Elmore’s famous “reciprocity of accountability,” which asserts that teachers need to be provided with additional capacity if schools expect them to perform different tasks or familiar tasks at a higher level (Elmore, 2004). Teachers at both these schools stressed the importance of their professional development. The researcher defined this from their comments as internal professional development they got from each other through all of their school, grade, and department meetings as well as other informal conversations they had with colleagues at lunch, during their prep periods, and even in out of work settings. This was also defined as the external professional development they got from outside presenters on topics ranging from “guided discipline” to changing the tone of their school to data training that helped them develop skills to improve their students’ learning based on findings in their assessments. They specifically identified training on how to use data to improve instruction as necessary to move their schools forward and this matches with much of

the literature as well (Clubine et al., 2001; Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Duke et al., 2005; Stein, 2012). Teachers at these schools both identified extended learning time as necessary to be able to engage in both kinds of professional growth. It is in this second stage of turnaround as this study defined it that teachers understand their practices have changed and in the turned around school it is where they saw student growth through data on internal and external assessments.

A second finding from the literature had to do with the importance of teacher voice in the turnaround process. Creating a culture where leadership can be shared makes the job doable for the principal, but also makes the work more meaningful for the rest of the people being asked to do it. “Sustainable leadership spreads. It sustains as well as depends upon the leadership of others” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

The finding of this study is that teachers in these schools did not recognize they had any leadership role in the turnaround process until the principal was certain the shared vision for the school had been clearly articulated. The teachers in this study thought it necessary for teacher voice to come after the right people were put into place, and the vision of the principal specifically had been clearly articulated as the vision for turning around the school.

The third stage of the turnaround continuum for these teachers is rooted in a fear about the sustainability of their improvement. This was true of both the turned around school who was currently in the third stage and the newly designated school that was concerned about what would happen if they ever made it to the stage where their data had improved. Teachers described to me a fear that they could lose valuable resources of time, money, and even motivation when the watchful eye of the state and its’ grant funds disappeared as result of the school’s improved designation.

In the interview done with two teachers from the turnaround school they described their fear this way:

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But how are you going to sustain it? ...We still have wellness but the grant was cut this year. Our professional development was already cut this year. We had separate math and science days in the summer and that was totally cut. Most teachers still participated but it wasn't paid and they didn't have the regular consultants that we usually do come in. Look at the amount of PD we had this year versus last, all these years, beyond already taken away.

These were two of the most positive teachers we interviewed in terms of being proud of what they and their school had been able to accomplish. They spoke passionately about how well the teachers there worked together and how advanced they felt when talking to teachers from other places because they had had so much professional development. Yet they still had this fear about how they were possibly going to be able to sustain this same improvement they were so proud of.

Where the researcher found hope for sustainability in this study had to do with the relational trust that was established at the turned around schools. The creation of this culture of trust happened over time when teachers worked together with the common goal of improving their students' achievement. Here teachers described how they sustained each other when they were having bad days, how they could go into each other's classrooms looking for ideas or inspiration and even how they became so close they went on vacations together and attended each other's weddings. The fear for turnaround schools is that the policy will overtake the people when it comes to focusing on what is important to do in this work. "If truth is the first casualty of war, then trust is the first fatality of imposed reform" (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 212). The fact that trust was not dead at the turned around school may be one of their greatest successes and their hope for sustaining their improvement.

## SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

The focus of this study was to examine the role of school boards in turnaround policy implementation. School boards have an important part to play in the implementation of education policy because of their role as democratically elected representatives of the community's voice in determining the education of its children. Because of their legislative authority and because they are agents of the community's interests, the school board can influence the ways in which policies are implemented (Rice, Delagardelle, Buckton, Jons, Lueders & Vens, 2001; Hess, 2010)

In general, findings in this study indicate that school boards make sense of their roles and responsibilities by responding to internal as well as external factors and influences. First, findings indicated that the role of school boards has become ambiguous and undefined as their historical roles have evolved, state activism has increased and the requirements of education reform legislation and the competing interests of turnaround legislation have become intertwined. Second, when faced with trying to make sense of their roles in turnaround, school board members reverted to the role they most closely identified with and understood best, that of approving budgets and allocating resources. School board sense-making was also influenced by two factors; communication and the role of a dissenting voice.

The first finding indicated that the school board's turnaround role in this LEA was undefined and sometimes misunderstood by board members as well as other policy implementers. School board members were caught between balancing their political roles as elected officials and agents of state policy with their community roles as education advocates and community members. The role of school boards described in turnaround legislation is inconsistent with education reform legislation and contributes to the lack of clarity. For instance, education reform legislation calls for school boards to play an active role in approving policy and establishing goals for the LEA but turnaround legislation limits the role of the school board. In this LEA, an increase in state activism and the superintendent's influence coupled with a decrease in school board authority contributed to the lack of clarity for members trying to

make sense of their roles and responsibilities. Opportunities for formal training to help school board members clarify and make sense of their specific role in a turnaround district were limited. While members were aware of their four areas of legislative responsibility they tended to focus primarily on two; selecting and evaluating the superintendent and setting the budget, both areas where they felt they had the most expertise and influence. District goal setting and policy development and implementation were seen as the work of the administration and building level leaders with the school board as a supporting actor.

As a result of school board members viewing their role in turnaround policy as one of budget and resources members focused on how to acquire and allocate resources, and how to distribute them equitably. They viewed long-term sustainability of turnaround as one of their primary concerns particularly since the district was heavily dependent on outside funding sources. Members viewed relationships, alliances and their understanding of the political landscape as important levers in solving the resource puzzle. In order to prioritize resources school board members relied on the direction and guidance of the superintendent. While limited, members benefited from opportunities to engage in direct contact with front line implementers who could translate the resource needs to board members. Board members used these opportunities to create shared understanding of the resource needs and were then able to use the information to advocate for additional resources from the community.

Board members viewed their resource role in three distinct ways; as *facilitators*, as *bridge builders* and as *navigators*. As facilitators, they brokered internal discussions to help them understand the resource needs, as bridge builders they interpreted and translated the districts needs to the community and as navigators they negotiated their way through the complex budget and finance environment of the city and state to access needed resources for the district.

A number of influencing factors were identified that also contributed to school board turnaround sense-making. Communication with internal and external

stakeholders was key. School board members relied on communication from the superintendent as the central conduit for distributing, interpreting, clarifying and making sense of turnaround policies. The effectiveness of the superintendent's use of data to communicate turnaround information, an influencing factor found with other implementer groups, was viewed as mixed by board members. Members understood the importance of using data to guide their decision-making, however they often lacked the background knowledge, training and expertise to use it successfully. Communication from external agents such as the State Education Agency (SEA) was also identified as influencing school board sense-making. Members viewed the intervention of state monitors from diverse perspectives. While members understood that the resources and support that came with state intervention were invaluable to the district, they still viewed themselves as the experts of the local context. As such, they viewed themselves as the community's voice when faced with mandates that conflicted with the values and beliefs of the community.

In addition to communication as an influencing factor in turnaround policy sense-making, the role of a dissenting voice also emerged as a factor. Dissenting voice in this study was viewed as one way to make sense of turnaround policies and requirements. "Sense-making through arguing" as noted by Weick is central to organizational sense-making. In this study school board members functioned as a collective group and made sense of the information before them as part of a social process. Their own beliefs, actions and expectations provided the structure through which sense-making occurred (Weick, 1995). The role of the dissenting voice contributed to sense-making by providing the opportunity for members to challenge each other and argue, what researchers have cited as a natural part of the process of sense-making. By engaging in sense-making through arguing board members clarified strategic ideas, potentially leading to more effective group decision making (Kayes & Kayes, 2012). Constructively engaging rather than suppressing dissenting voices can be an important strategy for strengthening rather than weakening sense-making.

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Turning around schools calls for creative and new ways of thinking, suppressing dissent can limit the expression of diverse beliefs, alternative views of the world, and ideas for improvement that may be exactly what is needed to increase student achievement.

As elected officials, school board members answer only to the electorate. They have an important role to play as representatives of the democratic process. Because of this, they may be the only implementers uniquely positioned to contribute to policy sense-making by engaging in debate, dissent and arguing as strategies for clarifying policy intentions and implementation.

### SUPERINTENDENT/CENTRAL OFFICE

The superintendent and selected central office administrators within the LEA are often the initial implementers of school and district turnaround policy. This study seeks to understand the role of central office in turnaround policy sense-making by collecting data on the superintendent and central office administrator sense-making and its impact on policy implementation. While recent research on school improvement has focused on school improvement actions and responsibilities of principals and teachers, this study seeks to address the research gap of the essential role of school district offices in school turnaround and improvement. In seeking to understand how district leaders make sense of turnaround policy implementation to support school turnaround, the findings revealed the superintendent and central office administrators found strong superintendent leadership, monitoring and support to schools, strategic distribution of resources, and management of human capital as key implementer actions.

The first finding encompassed superintendent leadership and its essential role in moving forward turnaround work. Multiple interviewees attributed student achievement gains and therefore successful policy implementation to the superintendent's ability to effectively communicate with the community and build

relationships with key stakeholders. The superintendent also established for central office administrators that their purpose is to support schools, and that they work for schools, schools don't work for them. Additionally, central office administrators, teachers, and principals noted more of a central office presence within their schools and an increased emphasis on teaching and learning during professional development.

This case study also revealed that the LEA's central office staff provided a support, monitoring, and accountability framework for its schools. The school review partner (SRP) process is created to provide support to the school's principal and teachers and to serve as a thought partner for the school's improvement processes. The SRP process leads to more frequent and better aligned monitoring of student achievement data. LEAs are also able to monitor the effectiveness of school-based instructional initiatives. Additionally, accountability is provided for principals and central office staff to ensure alignment of vision and follow through with instructional initiatives. While these practices are not perfectly and fully embedded within every facet of the district's work, there are key shifts that have taken place alongside the LEA's turnaround, and its turnaround of two chronically underperforming schools.

The third major area of finding is in the realm of access to financial and human resources to support school and system-wide turnaround. The case study LEA has limited resources like most urban districts, and often-times resources are key levers in school and system-wide turnaround. While some implementers, teachers and principals, believed that resource allocation varied across schools, central office implementers viewed resource allocation as equitable. For human resources, the superintendent provided building principals with latitude and control over the management of human capital. The superintendent also provided intentional leadership around making it clear to central office staff and principals that they could either join the district's turnaround philosophy or be asked to leave the district.



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Recommendations for school system leaders / practitioners include next steps for various stakeholders within the turnaround process including, school boards, superintendents, and central office administrators. School boards of urban school districts with turnaround schools should consider the leadership competencies of superintendent candidates and look at some of the leadership moves of the superintendent in this case study in developing a profile of their leadership needs. Superintendents have a complex and multi-faceted set of responsibilities and could reflect on their own leadership competencies to ensure successful implementation of turnaround policy. Superintendents also have responsibility for the sense-making of central office administrators to ensure alignment with the organizational vision. Finally, it's recommended that central office administrators touch schools in meaningful ways to ensure support, monitoring, and accountability.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Our study looked at sense-making of policy implementation from the perspective of four different implementer groups in a single district's chronically underperforming schools. Examining the four implementer groups, school board, superintendent/central office, school leadership, and teachers, we wanted to understand the role sense-making played in what the implementers actually did and what they thought was effective to improve school performance. The research team looked at the findings of each of the implementers groups and identified recommendations for the LEA around communication, the importance of data, and the use of resources to support turnaround.

### RECOMMENDATION ONE: INCREASE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN IMPLEMENTERS

A common theme that emerged from the findings was that there is a need for the turnaround policy to be communicated on a continual basis up and down the

implementer chain. With the understanding that increased communication helps to facilitate sense-making, we looked at how facilitating communication between all parties increased their understanding of what they were being asked to do. We found structures in place in the local education agency for this communication to happen. Specifically, technical communication between and among the implementers was already being done and implementers had a functional understanding of what turnaround was and what the school had to do in order to be successful. While this technical communication was in place, we found that communication that centered implementer sense-making more on their beliefs about their role and expectations rather than merely on the technical requirements of the policy was needed. With the aim to facilitate sense-making, the research team identified three ways to strengthen communication, which focus on better defining the communication that takes place within current communication structures.

The first recommendation concerns utilizing the building principal meetings with central office staff to develop a common language around what it means to turn around underperforming schools. Because sense-making around expectations and role was prevalent in the findings, principal meetings can include discussion about these two important elements of sense-making. The common language and wisdom gleaned through communication at these principal and central office meetings would also be valuable for the principals of schools who are not yet designated as level D schools. Explicit communication about what has led to turnaround success in other schools would be invaluable for school leaders throughout the district, especially those whose schools are level C. Central Office staff can discuss with building leaders the different scenarios of schools that resulted or did not result in successful school improvement.

The second recommendation around communication is to bring community involvement into the implementation of turnaround through an extension of the Local Stakeholders Group (LSG). Comprised primarily of community members, school staff,

and central office staff, the LSG submits recommendations to the superintendent who uses those recommendations to develop the turnaround plan for the local education agency. The policy does not require further action by the LSG, which means that community participation in the work of turning around the school can be reduced. Here, there is opportunity to extend the role of the LSG to the implementation phase of the turnaround plan, which would increase the engagement and responsibility of the community to contribute to turnaround efforts. One way to do this is through consistent meetings, possibly through the redesign team. Consistent meetings about the progress of the school will help keep everyone informed and would help to facilitate sense-making not only for the educators in the school building and district, but also for the larger school community.

Another recommendation pertains to communication with the school board. The findings reflect a need for the school board to have an opportunity to have more clarification about their expectations and role in turnaround. The school board has four areas of authority: budget, policy, evaluation of the superintendent and collective bargaining. These areas of authority are impacted by the turnaround legislation in that the school board has been grappling with how to make sense of their role in the context of the school district's focus on implementing turnaround policy. More explicit communication among the school board may help their understanding of the significant questions they have about their role and expectations in turnaround. Whether this is done through workshops or other professional development opportunities, the school board may benefit from these conversations that allow them to further their sense-making about what it means to be a school board member of a turnaround district.

A final recommendation about communication would be around paying special attention to the role of collaboration in the turnaround process at all levels. In our study one of our theoretical lenses was the role of social capital in policy

implementation. This theory posits that what actually gets implemented depends on who the implementers know and trust. Building trust by improving collaborative working relationships, between and among all implementer levels, through transparent communication will help insure consistency of understanding in terms of what is actually to be implemented in the turnaround process. In authentic collaboration there is room for working with dissenting voices who may in fact have much to offer in terms of improving the work of turnaround along the way.

### RECOMMENDATION TWO: SPECIFY A TRANSPARENT PROCESS FOR ALLOCATING RESOURCES

The findings indicated that implementers have questions about how resources are allocated throughout the LEA. There is confusion about why some schools get certain resources that other schools do not. This recommendation to specify a transparent process for allocating resources intends to alleviate some of this confusion.

As limited resources challenge the LEA, a process needs to define the priorities that guide how resources are distributed to specific programs and schools. By being explicit about these priorities for school improvement, all implementer groups, including school board, superintendent/ central office, principals, and teachers, would have a better understanding of where the resources should go and why. For example, the LEA can clarify their framework for resource allocation based on school level, programming, and student needs. This framework should include details of funding streams for academic programs, extracurricular programs, additional pay for teachers, and other areas essential to effective implementation of turnaround policy. Another example is to make transparent how staffing is allocated. Staff allocation includes teacher excising if they have not union protection and/or staff “opt-out” which means teachers choosing to transfer to other schools in the city after the new designation.

Transparency may involve identifying how teacher “opt-out” of level D schools occurs with the aim to ensure consistency of implementation of “opt-out” across schools.

This recommendation involves assessing the time provisioning of central office administrator’s delivery of support and monitoring across high priority (level D and C) schools. Currently, the perception among some in the LEA is that level D schools receive more support and attention from central office than other schools in the district. Clarifying this LEA’s system to monitor school-level support from central office administrators would ensure clear and equitable support. This would help to assuage the concerns that level D schools receive the most attention and support.

This LEA makes decisions about how resources are allocated to schools and programs across the district. The recommendation here is about making these decisions more transparent. This would help to alleviate confusion about resource allocation and the perception that some schools in the LEA receive more support than others.

### RECOMMENDATION THREE: DEVELOP THE CAPACITY OF ALL IMPLEMENTERS TO WORK WITH DATA.

An area that became prevalent in the findings across implementer groups was the use of data. It is apparent that data is at the crux of school improvement efforts as it became one of the most talked-about areas of school improvement by teachers, school leaders, central office personnel, and school board members. Indeed, the LEA has strengths regarding the capacity of implementers to use data where building and LEA leaders, along with numerous teachers, understand the importance using data and prioritize its role in school improvement. Although data is a significant part of school and LEA improvement planning, findings point to inconsistencies with the level of comfort and ability different implementers have with data analysis. The recommendation here is to increase capacity so that there is more consistency in

terms of how implementers understand and use the data. Central office plays a key role in this recommendation in that they would need to set the stage around how to use data in school improvement planning.

One opportunity to build capacity for analyzing data among teachers is to bring them together to share data analysis practices. While teachers interact with other teachers in their own schools, and perhaps informally with teachers in other schools, more formal structures could allow this to occur more prevalently. Giving teachers opportunities to collaborate across schools would increase their contact with other teachers around best practices of data. This could open up new ideas and ways of using data to inform their instruction.

Sharing of best practices can also occur among school leaders. Currently, school leaders meet with central office personnel, along with members of their faculty, to analyze data in their data review meetings. In addition, there are meetings that occur with central office, including the superintendent, and principals of all the schools in the LEA. As school leaders work together to build their own skills around applying data analysis to school improvement, there is opportunity here to look more at how they can lead their staffs through the process. Findings suggest that there is some inconsistency in how school leaders lead their staffs through the process of analyzing data and using that analysis to improve practice. School leaders might benefit from more in-depth conversations around how to effectively lead faculty in conversations about the data.

Another opportunity for building better understanding of the data is with the community of this LEA. This begins with working with school board to promote their sense-making of the data. Findings suggest that school board has little interaction with data and have fewer opportunities than the educators in the schools to analyze the data. Focusing some meetings and/or sessions with school board on looking at the data would help to increase their understanding of and how it informs turnaround.

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These conversations do not necessarily need to be overly cumbersome in detail. Rather, they might give an overview of what the data is saying about the LEA and why designations occur. This then would put school board members in a position to discuss with their constituencies about the turnaround work that is happening in the LEA. While school board meetings are perhaps likely places for this communication, and indeed discussions around data have occurred there, opportunities offered outside the context of a school board meeting may be beneficial. This may lead to a more informed community about what the data means in terms of their schools' performance.

## RECOMMENDATION FOUR: COMMUNICATE A CLEAR VISION OF LEADERSHIP FOR THE LEA

Looking at the findings across the four implementer groups, it became clear that the groups were looking at turnaround differently and focusing on different aspects of the turnaround process. They were expressing different priorities about what needed to be done to improve the schools. There appeared to be a lack of interdependence among the different implementer groups. That is, they tended to operate in silos, distinct from each other, and often not in tune to what other implementers were thinking or doing with the turnaround work.

There were several places where this lack of interdependence was apparent. Central office directors spoke about the importance of their monitoring role and how they worked with school leaders to put practices in place to improve school performance. Yet, school leaders did not talk much about this and were more focused on how they were working with their staffs. Teachers described a style of leadership in their schools at the beginning phase of turnaround that was directive, whereas, when

school leaders described their approach, it resembled more of an instructional leadership approach. The school board was knowledgeable about the responsibilities given to them under education reform but they were less clear on their role in turnaround. The other three implementer groups rarely mentioned the school board, indicating that the school board leadership role was not prevalent in their view. This lack of interdependence may be attributed to the fact that a clear vision from the LEA about what implementers should be thinking and doing to raise school performance was absent. Rather, some implementers were relying on the policy to set their vision for them. That is, upon designation, their vision was about doing what was necessary to exit turnaround status within a specific timeframe. Implementers did not speak about any kind of long-range vision that the LEA established about leading turnaround. LEA leaders did not describe whether they saw the LEA as a system whose parts should be working together towards a common vision or how they envisioned the system supporting learning at the building level.

For this LEA, a clear vision of leadership is needed to help guide and sustain school improvement. When talking about turnaround leadership at the school building level, Leithwood et al. (2010) emphasize the importance of vision when they recommend turnaround leaders engage their staffs in developing the vision of a school as a source of motivation to commit to the work of school turnaround. In implementing this suggestion at the LEA level, this LEA would bring implementer groups more into alignment with each other and with the LEA in terms of how they implement turnaround. Fullan (2006) who also focuses on turnaround leadership at the building level, discusses the need to implement systemic reform by using a “trilevel development solution” that includes alignment between the state, LEA, and school. Establishing this alignment requires conversation, face to face interactions and the co-construction of meaning that are integral to the sense-making described by researchers (Weick, 1995; Datnow, 2006). In this LEA, the relationships between the



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district, community and the school is critical where all three work need to work in concert with each other. A vision of leadership would strengthen those relationships and help to create the interdependence needed for implementers of turnaround policy to be working in the same direction. Strengthening the interdependence between implementer groups can also be reinforced by making sure that all voices are represented, including dissenting voices. This common vision would not be about merely exiting or avoiding turnaround status. Rather, it would be about the kinds of educational experiences that leadership would create for students that transcend what the turnaround policy mandates.

## CONCLUSION

This research generated insights into what educators in this LEA think and do as they implement turnaround policy. Emerging from these insights are recommendations that are intended to enhance the turnaround work that is already happening across schools in this LEA. Because sense-making relies so heavily on communication, increasing communication is suggested here as a way to facilitate understanding of turnaround policy. Yet, this understanding goes beyond knowing the policy requirements. Communication can help educators in the district better understand their role and expectations, which are not necessarily outlined in the policy. This is the process of co-construction as implementers' communication with each other helps them to make meaning. Also recommended is to specify a transparent process for allocating resources. This LEA makes decisions about how resources are distributed across schools and programs. Yet, the findings in this research suggest that there is some confusion as to how those decisions are made. Clarifying these decisions would help to alleviate confusion and increase trust in the process, which can then help to guide implementers' decisions around turnaround implementation. The third recommendation about data use comes from a major theme across the studies about the prevalence of data in school improvement planning and

implementation. This LEA already uses data, but there are some inconsistencies in the capacity of implementers to analyze and use data. School leaders, central office personnel, and teachers, would benefit from collaborative opportunities for work with data. School board members may need more experience with data in order to communicate with their constituencies about what the data says about the schools in the LEA. Providing more opportunities for implementers to work with data would not only help with school improvement efforts, but it would also help the community of this LEA to better understand the data that informs turnaround work of their schools.

These recommendations aim to outline how this LEA can increase its capacity to exercise successful turnaround of its chronically underperforming schools. Increased communication can lead to more sense-making, which can help to guide turnaround implementation decisions. More transparency about the way resources are distributed can offer guidance to implementers throughout the LEA about how to approach turnaround work. Increasing capacity to analyze and use data would inform decisions that successfully leads to school improvement. As with most advice about school improvement, this is not offered as a universal remedy to this LEA's turnaround challenges. Rather, it is intended to enhance the thinking that goes into school improvement planning and implementation. That is, these suggestions can help implementers make sound decisions about what they should do when taking on the immense task of turning around a chronically under performing school.

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**Dedication**

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## Chapter One: Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In writing the introduction to the recently released Equity and Excellence Commission Report, *For Each and Every Child*, co-chairs Christopher Edley Jr. and Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar state the case for why improving and turning around our nation's chronically underperforming schools is critical.

The situation is dire, the agenda urgent. From parent associations to Capitol Hill, from classroom teachers to the White House—there is work to be done and passion to be spent by all of us who appreciate the stakes for our children and for the nation's future. If we fail in this work, we will forfeit our position of economic and moral leadership. We will risk the future of our people and of America as we know it (Equity and Excellence Commission Report, 2013, p.9).

According to the 2012 Children's Defense Fund (CDF) Report on the State of America's Children, 43% of the children living in poverty live in urban settings where the concentration of chronically underperforming schools is the highest. Only 68% of the students who enter 9th grade graduate with a high school diploma. African American and Hispanic males have the most dismal graduation rates of all, just 43% for Black males and 48% for Hispanic males (Orfield, Losen, Wald, Swanson, 2001). Education reform is one of the levers, which can be used to ensure that every school is equipped to provide a high quality education to every student. We contend that the development and implementation of effective education policy that aligns with education reform goals is one way to increase achievement for all students.

Reforming chronically under-performing schools has been identified as one of the nation's top priorities. In a May 2009 policy speech, Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education, articulated his

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Jamie Chisum, Anna Cross, and Jill Geiser.

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“turnaround” policy initiative and his intent to aggressively move to improve 5000 under-performing schools over five years. In School Year (SY) 2010-2011, the federal government allocated 14.3 billion dollars via state grants and allocations dedicated to school improvement. Reforming schools has required not only a significant investment of tax dollars but has also served as a lightning rod for issues of accountability and equity for all underserved students. The successful implementation of education reform policies can significantly impact student lives. Yet implementing education reform policy is neither a simple nor linear process.

Some researchers argue that school reform policy has failed to produce any significant change despite the fact that a tremendous number of reform efforts have been attempted (Fullan, 1991; Hess, 1999; Murphy, 2010). Others argue that successful implementation of systemic reform may be affected by the complexity of the policy implementation, the politics of the policy adoption, how the policy problem is framed and even the language and symbols used to communicate the intent of the policy (Hess, 1999; Honig, 2006; Malen, 2006; McLaughlin, 2006; Hill, 2006 ). The importance of policy and its implementation is the common thread that links researchers and ultimately practitioners in the field who are held accountable for decreasing gaps in student achievement. Understanding and interpreting policies and their intended meaning, what we will define as “sense-making,” can influence the success or failure of reform initiatives (Honig, 2006; Weick, 1995).

In this state under study, the urgency of understanding how to make sense of and effectively implement reform policies has immediate and real time implications for educators, communities and students. In 2009 the United States Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act which re-authorized funding for the School Improvement Grants (SIG) program, outlining specific requirements for chronically underperforming schools. In January 2010, aligning state law to federal regulations, this state passed legislation that outlines the steps and timeline required to raise the performance of chronically under-performing schools, within a 3-year period. These chronically

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underperforming schools are now known as “turnaround schools.” The overall goal of this policy is to raise the level of school effectiveness so that all students in the school become well prepared for the next level of education. With a three-year window in which schools must show significant progress in student achievement or risk further corrective action, multiple implementer groups including administrators, community members, teachers and parents each have a significant role to play in developing and implementing plans to increase student achievement.

Educators are called upon regularly to implement federal and locally-designed policies and are then held accountable for demonstrating that the implementation of the policy has yielded positive results. Our assumption is that the implementation of any policy should be aligned with its goals as much as possible and that implementation acts as a bridge between realizing the original intent of the policy and the policy itself. We acknowledge that the implementation of any policy, particularly school reform policy, is a complex and multi-layered endeavor. Therefore, it is critical to understand how reform policy is being implemented and whether there are forces that influence the implementation and realization of the original goals. In the case of turnaround policy, where implementers’ actions are expected to lead to improved outcomes for students in order to meet the intent of the policy, how they understand what they are being asked to do can make all the difference. With this, we turn to the concept of sense-making.

Sense-making considers how implementers interpret such policy to better understand what leads to implementation decisions. For example, if implementers do not deeply understand or make sense of the policies that are intended to guide the turnaround process, they may misinterpret the policy goals or they might not understand how it relates to their day-to-day work. They may dismiss it entirely because it does not have an obvious practical application, or worse, they may implement it ineffectively. The chances, therefore, of successful implementation are greatly reduced. If those policies are intended to

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increase student achievement and the policy is sabotaged, ignored, or misinterpreted, student access to an equitable and high quality education may be compromised.

While this research focuses specifically on turnaround policy, it may have broader implications about the role of sense-making in the process of turning around a school or an entire local education agency. This research may unearth insights about how implementer sense-making about policy can lead to school improvement. It may also identify areas of tension or confusion for implementers as they begin to make sense of the policies, and those outside factors that influence their understanding and the importance of who and how policy is communicated. It may also be possible to determine the amount of time and resources each implementer group takes to gain a full understanding of the policy. Sense-making could influence each implementer's view of their own ability to engage in the turnaround process and may shape the decisions they make when faced with the task of turning around a school. It may also affect how the policy translates into the turnaround plan, which outlines specific steps to inform the work of turning around a school. This study examined the impact of sense-making on policy implementation by focusing on the following research questions:

1. How do various implementers' (superintendent/central office, building leaders, teachers, school board members) make sense of turnaround policy?
2. How does this sense-making influence policy implementation?
3. What factors influence sense-making?

In this single case study, we explored how different implementers in a designated Level D district make sense of turnaround policy. We begin by presenting an overview of the current legislation and the process by which schools are designated underperforming. The research literature on the characteristics of chronically underperforming schools and effective practices for turnaround school

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improvement is discussed (Fullan, 2006; Leithwood, 1994), and we review the current literature on policy implementation and why we chose to view policy implementation through a theoretical frame that builds upon sense-making as a research construct (Weick, 1995). A number of internal and external factors that have been identified through the literature and how they might affect policy sense-making are outlined (Honig, 2006; Malen, 2006; Datnow, 2006). Finally, we present a graphic synthesis of the theoretical frame, which formed the basis for our study followed by a description of the research design and methodology. Four individual studies were conducted that each focused on the unique aspects of the sense-making process in targeted implementer groups: school board members, superintendent/central office, building leaders, and teachers.

## Chapter Two: Review of the Literature<sup>2</sup>

### Federal and State Regulations and Policies

**Federal policy setting the stage.** Recent federal and state regulations outline detailed requirements about what schools need to do to raise their level of performance. In January of 2002, the U.S. Congress approved “An Act to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind,” colloquially referred to as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). The elongated legislative title makes clear that the goal of the federal policy is to close the achievement gap. The law requires a number of actions from state education agencies (SEAs) and school districts, including hiring highly qualified educators, notifying parents on the quality of their child’s education, and requiring states to adopt challenging academic standards for all students. Perhaps the most important part of the legislation is the requirement that all schools and districts make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), which is the minimum threshold for improvement schools are required to meet each year. A school that does not achieve AYP for two consecutive years faces the threat of corrective action. The advent of NCLB brought attention to measures of school effectiveness and requirements placed upon schools to perform incrementally or face consequences (Ravitch, 2010).

**Analysis of state turnaround policy.** With federal policy as a backdrop, legislation enacted in early 2010 was this state’s interpretation of the NCLB goal to narrow the achievement gap. The 2010 law addressed chronically underperforming schools by requiring the state education agency (SEA) to designate or level schools within the framework for district accountability and assistance according to student academic performance.<sup>[1]</sup> Designation of level includes a range of factors, such as exclusion and drop-out rate, but it is based primarily on student performance on the state assessment. Designation comes out of a compilation of data, including the aggregate performance of the school along with the

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<sup>2</sup> This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Jamie Chisum, Anna Cross, and Jill Geiser.

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performance of subgroups identified by race and ethnicity (e.g. African American, Hispanic, etc.), learning profile (e.g. students with disabilities, English language learners, etc.) and income levels (e.g. low-income). This is notable because, similar to NCLB, disaggregating the data forces schools to consider the performance of all its students by highlighting how each subgroup is doing academically. Once the data is compiled, the state designates schools level C and D based on where they fall relative to the other schools in their grade level span. The lowest 20 percent of schools in a grade level span are classified as level C. A subset of those schools, not more than 4 percent, is deemed eligible for level D status. These are chronically underperforming schools, informally referred to as “turnaround schools.” It is this level D designation that triggers the turnaround process that is outlined in the policy. The turnaround requirements also apply to schools designated level F, and a key element of turnaround for these schools is state takeover. This leveling system is used to determine where state assistance and intervention is most needed.

The process that school districts must undergo upon level D designation, as outlined in the turnaround legislation, includes a series of steps to develop a turnaround plan. This process begins with a local stakeholder group, comprised of members in and outside the school, which convenes to develop recommendations for a turnaround plan that is submitted to the superintendent. This part of the policy indicates that the state considers that the community has a role in the turnaround process. However, the policy does not require that stakeholder groups participate in the turnaround process beyond the initial phase of making recommendations. Once recommendations are submitted, the superintendent is responsible for the actual development of the turnaround plan and its implementation. The policy appears to emphasize the role of educators in the work of implementing the turnaround plan and does not require community involvement in the implementation stage.

In addition to outlining the process, the legislation dictates specific areas that need to be addressed in the plan. These include achievement gaps, alternative English language learner programs,



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financial planning, social service and health needs, child welfare services and law enforcement, and workforce development services. The plan must also include measurable annual goals using a range of data points such as the state assessment system (SAS), student promotion, graduation, student attendance, student discipline, and family engagement. These requirements reflect a view that there are a range of factors that impact student learning beyond what happens in the classroom. The policy requires the school to pay attention to other areas of social and emotional health as well as the relationship between the school and students' families. Schools are also compelled to look at different data points to gain a holistic view of student performance, which is not only about performance on state assessments.

Finally, there are optional components of the plan. These include, but are not limited to, reallocation of the budget, expanded school day or year, alteration of the curriculum, job-embedded professional development, and limiting or changing school district policy. There are other optional elements that may be subject to collective bargaining, one example of which is requiring all staff to reapply for employment. These elements allow for some flexibility with school structures that are often thought of as inflexible. For example, little flexibility is typically seen with budget and scheduling. These tend to be fixed processes and structures. Yet, this policy acknowledges that chronically underperforming schools may need to have the leeway to adjust school time and budgets in order to reach turnaround goals. Similarly, the policy opens the door for districts to engage in collective bargaining on areas that are viewed as critical to turnaround success, but that need to be agreed upon with the local teachers union.

State legislation outlines the turnaround process that underperforming schools must undergo with the aim to demonstrate higher student achievement within a three-year period through the implementation of a turnaround plan. This is aligned with federal funding regulation that imposes requirements on school districts in order to qualify for School Improvement Grants (SIG) and Race to the Top (RTTT) funding. According to that regulation, schools and districts need to turn around within 2

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to 3 years, as measured by student achievement data. A key requirement is that schools identified, as “turnaround” must implement one of the turnaround models if they want to be considered for a school improvement grant. These models are labeled turnaround, restart, school closure, and transformation (Race to the Top Fund, 2009, p. 59763). When the turnaround plan is developed and the school improvement grants application is submitted, a turnaround model is chosen. The policy or grant requirements do not state who is responsible for choosing the model. However, since the superintendent is responsible for the development of the plan, as noted earlier, it would stand to reason that the superintendent would likely be a primary voice in the selection of the model. What is notable about these models is that they all require shifts in staffing, whether that is removal of school leadership and/or part of the teaching staff. While these models are not mandated interventions of the legislation, they are prioritized through the school improvement grant requirements in that they are tied to funding and are not a requirement of the turnaround policy itself. Although this study is not necessarily looking at the role of the model, we acknowledge that implementers’ perception of the policy and corresponding turnaround work may be influenced by the requirements of the selected model.

The turnaround policy in the state we studied contains a range of elements that are intended to facilitate successful turnaround of level D and F designated schools. Although the policy does not explicitly articulate the practices educators need to exercise to raise academic performance of their students, its elements suggest that the policy operates on certain assumptions about what conditions would help to support turnaround efforts. Whether that is flexibility in structures, attention to a range of factors in learning, or community involvement, the policy reflects a view that turnaround schools can improve when these elements are addressed. Furthermore, although the policy does not contain language around specific turnaround models to use, the state prioritizes the use of the models by attaching it to the funding that is available to support turnaround efforts. This is important because the turnaround models

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involve shifts of staffing that could impact how the educators in and around the school view the turnaround work.

### **Understanding Turnaround Schools**

The turnaround policy has a specific view of a turnaround school a chronically underperforming school as measured by student achievement performance data. Yet, those data points do not reflect the challenging conditions that surround chronically underperforming schools. In order to fully understand turnaround schools, we look beyond the leveling of schools that emerges from low performance on state assessments to the conditions of those schools and their communities. Chronically underperforming schools share many of the same challenging conditions regardless of whether or not they are labeled a “turnaround school” via the policy. Therefore, we look to the broad range of literature which examines conditions in schools that are considered underperforming, challenging, and/or high-need in order to fully grasp the nature of the work that is involved in turning them around.

One condition that appears to be common in chronically underperforming schools is poverty. The literature reveals that the low socioeconomic status of the school’s population is often identified as a condition of a low-performing school (Duke, Tucker, Belcher, Crews, Harrison-Coleman & Higgins, 2005; Murphy & Meyers, 2008). High levels of poverty often increase the level of stress on a school resulting in a need to provide more services for students (Corallo & McDonald, 2001). In an opinion article in the *New York Times*, Reardon (2013) emphasizes the central role of social and economic status in the success of students in school. He notes in particular that while small gains have been made in closing the achievement gap between racial groups, there continues to be a gap between students of different socioeconomic status, with students living in poverty persistently performing well behind those of their more affluent peers. This means that schools serving high poverty communities often face the challenge of raising the academic performance of their low-income students.

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Although the home environment of children living in poverty influences their school performance, the low achievement of poor children is not due solely to family background. Their school experience also plays a critical role in their academic progress (Gezi, 1990). A number of areas that impact student achievement are associated with low-performing schools. Poor teacher quality (Duke et al., 2005; Murphy & Meyers, 2008), high teacher turnover (Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Murphy & Meyers, 2008) and ineffective leadership (Murphy & Meyers, 2008) are all associated with a school's inability to effectively show high student achievement. Other school conditions include a lack of teamwork, curriculum that is not aligned, and discipline issues (Duke et al., 2005). Educator practices and beliefs also play a role in low student achievement. Blaming students for failure, which often stems from low morale (Murphy & Meyers, 2008) and low expectations of students (Corallo & McDonald, 2001), is typically found in underperforming schools. From their findings of a study of the Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program (VSTSP), which examined the practices of ten successful turnaround leaders, Duke et al. (2005) echo these low expectations by describing the conditions of a dysfunctional culture in which educators assume a punitive and reactionary attitude towards students displaying a lack of achievement. Low parent involvement is also commonly found in underperforming schools where communication and collaboration between school and home is minimal and weak (Clubine, Knight, Schneider, & Smith, 2001). This literature illustrates how turnaround schools operate in challenging contexts. Rather than view these conditions as barriers to school improvement, we feel they need to be taken into account when turning around chronically underperforming schools.

We look to these descriptions of chronically underperforming schools to understand the kinds of conditions that may exist in current turnaround schools designated under current state and Federal legislation. These are schools with weak school structures and practices in communities with high poverty rates. Although all the conditions described above might not apply to all schools labeled a

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“turnaround school,” they are common enough to illustrate some of the challenging conditions that educators face when embarking on the work of turning around underperforming schools.

### **Review of Research on Improving Chronically Underperforming Schools**

Given this characterization of turnaround schools as schools with challenging conditions, we examine the research that highlights the practices that have been successful in improving chronically underperforming schools. Because research on practices for school turnaround in response to policy mandates is lacking, this review is derived from a broad range of research studies of effective practices in underperforming schools, many of which may not necessarily have implemented specific policy requirements for school improvement. It is our belief that the findings from these research studies could aid our understanding of the kinds of practices that educators might draw on when implementing turnaround policy. If the goal of the policy is to raise student achievement and to close the achievement gap, what educators do to meet those ends is paramount, and research on effective practices can potentially inform how they approach the work. These practices have been examined through a variety of lenses, including motivation, professional development, development of teacher leaders, vision and goal-setting, data, instructional time and programming, and collaboration.

**Motivation.** One of these lenses is the role of motivation in the process of change. Albert Bandura (1994) defines motivation as the “activation to action.” He argues that people are able to remain motivated in stressful situations when they believe they have self-efficacy and the ability to overcome their stressors. What school leaders do can influence how educators motivate themselves to do turnaround work. Leaders have to instill hope and confidence in the teachers in order for the work of a turnaround to even be attempted (Murphy & Meyers, 2008). There is a human element to turning around schools and therefore the emotional impact of the reform efforts on teachers must be considered in order for the changes to be successful. The school leader must take into account how it feels for people to go through change in such a stressful environment (Evans, 1996; Norman, 2010). Motivation is particularly

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important in light of policy requirements that are imposed on schools from the state. On the one hand, they might contribute to the stress that educators feel. On the other hand, mandates that threaten the elimination of jobs, the closing of schools, and even the public shaming associated with turnaround schools can serve a purpose (Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, Levy & Saunders, 2008). The threat of loss of employment and school closure serve to introduce a crisis into the turnaround school, particularly if the teachers there did not feel it already. This is akin to accountability pressure that comes into play when achievement targets must be met in order to show improvement. It is helpful to leverage this accountability pressure to compel educators to focus on their performance (Jacobson, Johnson, Ylimaki, & Giles, 2005; Fullan, 2006). Turnaround work can be fostered by the school leadership, or it can be motivated by policy mandates with consequences for noncompliance. Regardless of the motivation, educators' beliefs about their ability to create sustainable improvement in student achievement are key to turning around an underperforming school.

**Vision and goal setting.** Perhaps the practice most frequently cited for raising school performance centers on vision and mission. Successful leaders in low-performing schools drive the work at hand by communicating and maintaining a highly focused vision and mission that is about student learning (Clubine, et al., 2001; Duke, 2006; Gezi, 1990; Jacobson, et al., 2005; Leithwood, Harris & Strauss, 2010; Murphy, 2010; Murphy & Meyers, 2008; Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2002; Potter, Reynolds, & Chapman, 2002; Salmonowicz, 2009; Duke et al., 2005). While the literature has examined this feature in a variety of contexts, it is the one that is primarily noted as having a significant impact on school improvement success. Distinguishing between strategies for short-term versus long-term gains, Corallo and McDonald (2001) note that developing a common vision and mission is one that would result in long-term gains. Gezi (1990) articulates this critical role of vision when he says, "Leadership seems to infuse the school not only with the vision but with the positive climate,

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communication and support that are essential ingredients of a sense of ownership, enthusiasm, commitment and pride in achievement” (p. 9).

Similar to establishing a vision, goal setting has a significant role in the work of turning around underperforming schools. Establishing clear goals and priorities is an essential component of raising the level of performance for any underperforming school (Anderson et al., 1999; Gezi, 1990; Leithwood et al., 2010; Murphy, 2010; Stein, 2012) with an emphasis on the use of targets to benchmark progress towards goals (Potter et al., 2002). This points to the importance of objectives and targets in outlining the improvement goals of the school. Research points to the importance of having an overall vision of performance for the school along with specific goals.

**Data.** Working in tandem with goal setting is the use of data. Some of the research notes the value of analyzing student achievement data to guide instruction in low performing schools (Clubine et al., 2001; Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Duke et al., 2005; Stein, 2012). Leithwood et al. (2010) claim that the leadership practices most associated with successful school turnaround include monitoring of student learning and overall school progress. They write, “School and district leaders constantly monitor evidence about the learning of students and the efforts of staff to improve such learning, continuously adjusting their own decisions and actions in response to this evidence” (p. 159). Indeed, turnaround schools need to engage in a continual process of self-analysis in order to monitor progress and determine areas that persistently lag (Murphy & Meyers, 2008). This reflects how data should be used to ensure progress towards goals already set, not just in individual classrooms, but also school wide, all of which embodies the process of measuring accountability. The literature illustrates that there is a strong link between goal setting and using data to measure progress for leaders in underperforming schools and that using data has a key role in school improvement.

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**Building capacity.** Another key component to improving chronically underperforming schools is in the area of capacity building. The work of M. Bruce King and Kate Bouchard (2011) on building organizational capacity in schools defines capacity as the “collective power of a faculty to strengthen student performance throughout their school” (p. 654). Richard Elmore (2004) addresses the role of professional development in bridging the gap between performance and human capacity. An expert on the modern school reform movement, Elmore argues for a more robust and targeted professional development plan in schools that values the idea of “reciprocity of accountability,” which asserts that teachers need to be provided with additional capacity if schools expect them to perform different tasks or familiar tasks at a higher level. Indeed, professional development is a common means used to increase staff skills and knowledge to improve their individual and collective performance. Newmann, King, and Young (2000) further claim that schools that used a comprehensive approach to professional development were more likely to focus on the long-term consistency, improving teacher knowledge over time, thereby building capacity. They add that professional development for principals must ensure they understand the importance of building capacity.

Bringing in external resources is one way to help build capacity. Due to the difficulty of developing capacity in low performing schools, King and Bouchard (2011) provide insight they gained from the Wisconsin Idea Leadership Academy (WILA), a hybrid program that combines the resources of a university school of education, the state education department, a mid-size urban district, and six schools. They note that the success of the WILA model is that it provides leadership coaching for school leadership teams, instructional coaching for teachers, cross-lateral networks for sharing of best practices between schools, and alignment between WILA coaches and state liaisons. School-university partnerships are key external resources as noted by Vernon-Dotson and Floyd (2012) who found in their research of three K-12 school partnerships with local universities that external technical assistance provided by universities to teacher teams can build capacity in schools. Consistent with past school



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reform movements, the work of school districts with turnaround schools is to find external resources and service providers to help build capacity in schools engaged in the current turnaround experiment (Fullan, 2006; Zavadsky, 2012). Given the complexity of improving student achievement in turnaround schools providing quality professional development for teachers is critical to equipping them for the work of school turnaround.

**Teacher leaders.** Another aspect that is addressed in the literature is the importance of sustained improvement and not just a temporary fix for underperforming schools. One way this improvement is sustained is through the identification and development of teacher leaders who will commit to continuing the work over time to realize student achievement gains. In their research on teacher leadership in the UK, Muijs and Harris (2006) emphasized that being a teacher leader was not limited to leading a department or team, but instead entailed having any kind of responsibility for making improvements. They found that teacher leadership was a significant factor in school improvement as it increased teacher professional learning because they were able to learn amongst their peers. In fact, teacher leadership is tied to capacity building as noted by Dinham and Crowther (2011) whose research on building sustainable capacity in schools found that the distributed leadership model and the relationship between principals and teacher leaders is a key factor in building school capacity. Defining what teacher leadership looks like, Vernon-Dotson and Floyd (2012) claim that when teachers become immersed in tackling school challenges with a leadership lens, they are inspired to go above and beyond their job description and become participants in school-wide change. Furthermore, teachers who engaged in collaborative leadership experiences felt valued and were more likely to buy into school initiatives because they were a part of the decision-making process. As a result, teachers were more likely to implement commonly developed professional development activities and put strategies into action. Spillane and Coldren (2011) further describe distributed leadership in their discussion about diagnosis and design for school improvement when they say that it is not only about the leadership

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actions, but includes how people communicate in schools and how the situation influences their interactions. By employing distributed leadership, turnaround schools can better maximize their resources by engaging faculty in deeper and more meaningful ways that will help sustain the work.

**Collaboration and teamwork.** Collaboration and teamwork are also areas that research has shown to contribute to successful school improvement. Some studies have found that relationship building coupled with collaboration between stakeholders is key to raising the level of performance of an underperforming school (Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Duke et al., 2005; Fullan, 2006; Harris, 2006; Mulford et al., 2008; Murphy & Meyers, 2008). Clubine et al. (2001) found that in successful turnaround schools, collaboration took several forms, including common team planning where teachers discussed student progress, curriculum, and instructional goals. Indeed, this collaboration has a particular role in school reform in that in successful school turnaround, there is a collective sense of responsibility for student improvement (Anderson et al., 1999). Yet, collaboration does not always naturally occur without guidance. In her examination of change efforts in schools with difficult contexts in England, Harris (2006) emphasizes the need for a leader to be open and honest as they build quality interpersonal relationships. This lays a critical foundation for teamwork and collaboration. In fact, empowerment and a sense of trust are a critical part of collaboration. Once these are infused into the organization, a collaborative environment can flourish (Fullan, 2006; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Harris, 2002). Educator collaboration can help educators to feel less isolated and more connected to a common goal of making gains in student learning. In the end, the value of collaboration is its role in supporting educators in the difficult work of school improvement.

**Instructional time and programming.** Another significant part of improving chronically underperforming schools involves focusing on instructional time and examining instructional programming. Studying three high-poverty elementary schools, Jacobson et al. (2007) found that successful principals revamped structures, policies, and procedures where needed and refocused

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conversations on how to improve student learning. While this applies to the operation of the school overall, what is suggested is that these structures are needed to support the instructional programming. Picucci et al. (2002), in their study of school turnaround, found that schools that showed rapid achievement gains helped to maintain instructional quality by reducing any distractions to teaching. This included strengthening student management systems in order to increase teachers' focus on instruction and less on managing student behaviors. Leithwood et al. (2010) also discussed the need to eliminate distractions, but more in terms of buffering staff from "being pulled in directions incompatible with agreed-on organizational goals" (p. 162). With structures in place to support a focus on teaching and a reduction of distractions, the time for actual planning and delivery of instruction can be maximized.

### **How the Literature Relates to This Study**

Literature on school improvement, particularly for challenging schools, outline specific leadership practices that, when implemented effectively, contribute to the success of school improvement. These practices include attending to staff motivation, building capacity, developing teacher leaders, setting a vision and goals, using data, maximizing instructional time and programming, and providing opportunities for collaboration. While literature has uncovered effective practices to raise school performance, most of the chronically underperforming schools in these research studies have not necessarily been responding to policy mandates of school turnaround. Indeed, new legislation now attempts to improve school performance by imposing general requirements around how turnaround work is to occur. However, the policy does not articulate the practices educators should use to implement it. That is, the general requirements are about the process of developing the turnaround plan and elements that must be included. It does not include language around how educators should approach the work of school turnaround in order to meet the turnaround goals of raising student achievement. That is left up to the educators to determine what practice would most likely be effective in raising student achievement.

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That is where this body of research comes in. School leaders might turn to these research studies to understand what practice they should exercise in order to meet the turnaround goals.

The research on practices that improve the performance of chronically underperforming schools is ample. Therefore, the purpose of this research is not to explore best practices for turning around underperforming schools. Rather, we aimed to unearth how turnaround work occurs as a response to policy mandates, in light of these proven effective practices. As discussed earlier, educators are responsible for implementing turnaround policy and the practices described above might inform how they do that, especially given a policy that does not require or even suggest specific practices. With a policy that does not suggest educational practices for implementers, and a body of research that reveals effective practices in turning around schools, what is missing is research that looks at what practices educators put in place to implement turnaround policy. In order to better understand how these implementation decisions are made, we turned to how educators interpreted and made sense of the policy itself. This may have a great impact on the implementation and ultimately on the success or failure of the policy.

### **Theoretical Basis for the Study**

**Policy Implementation.** State legislation requires that turnaround plans lead to rapid academic achievement of students. The literature review of best practices outlines what is needed to turn around chronically underperforming schools and policy implementers may use these as guides to know which actions to take. Whereas the policy articulates the goal of higher student achievement, the literature answers the question of what to do to reach that outcome.

The theoretical basis for this research first looks at policy implementation as a critical factor in whether or not practice is aligned with policy goals. Green (1983) provides a theoretical overview for the relationship between policy and practice through his discussion of excellence, equity, and equality.

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He identifies the problem of determining whether the tools of public policy can impact practice, questioning the nature of public policy and its limitations. He claims that public policy addresses the common good and not the good of individuals, and further argues that the tools of policy are primarily aimed to minimize evil, rather than promote benefits. Green's work is significant to our study because it points to the role of policy implementation in relation to changing practice. In turnaround schools changing practice is essential to improving student achievement.

The field of policy implementation research formally emerged during the 1960s. Since then it has undergone three distinctive generations or waves of research (Honig, 2006). The first wave focused on what gets implemented. Early research studies looked at policies that were intended to achieve wide ranging societal goals. The second wave, during the 1970s, focused on what gets implemented over time, and included a growing recognition of the fact that policy, people and places mattered to implementation. During the 1980's a third wave of research evolved which centered on concerns with what works and the field began to focus on "implementers' agency as an important avenue for implementation research" (Honig, 2006, p. 9).

Honig (2006) notes that past treatment of policy implementation in research relied on a distinction between "successful" policies, those that result in higher student achievement, and "implementable" policies, those where implementation closely resembles policy design. She further states that research needs to acknowledge that there is significant complexity involved in policy implementation and includes the interaction between policies, people and places, and the demands on implementers. The critical question is about, "what is implementable and what works for whom, where, when and why" (Honig, 2006, p. 2). Included in this complexity are the factors that have a role in what implementers do with policy and the actions they take, which may include their belief systems, background, knowledge, and the contexts that influence what they can and will do (Honig, 2006). The process that individuals or organizations engage in to create "understanding" when faced with complex,

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dissonant or ambiguous circumstances leads to a more in-depth analysis of the theory base for this study. Here, sense-making may have a significant role in policy implementation in terms of how implementers understand the policy that dictates turnaround work. This research study looked at how well implementers' understanding of policy support its execution and if there are influencing factors that impact the way in which implementers make sense of the policy. Understanding the impact of implementer sense-making is not only important and practical for school districts who are engaging in turnaround work in response to policy mandates, but it is also high stakes for the success of students currently attending chronically underperforming schools.

### **Policy Sense-making**

Defining “understanding” requires a further analysis of a body of research which spans multiple disciplines and multiple interpretations. Prior researchers from the fields of organizational psychology, sociology, management science, social anthropology and more recently education policy implementation have defined this process as “sense-making.” Organizational psychologist Karl Weick (1995), a key contributor to the development of this theoretical frame, stated simply, “The concept of sense-making is well named because, literally it means the making of sense.” Weick (1995) further defined the concept by stating, “how they (individuals) construct what they construct, why and with what effects, are the central questions for people interested in sense-making” (p. 4). Weick (1995) grounds his version of sense-making in seven properties that he argues are most commonly found throughout the sense-making literature, including; 1) grounded identity construction; 2) retrospective; 3) enactive of sensible environments; 4) social; 5) ongoing; 6) focused on and by extracted cues; and 7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. He argues that each of the seven properties can be used to define various characteristics of sense-making. For example, sense-making begins with the sense-maker (grounded identity construction). An individual's environment as well as their past experiences are used in sense-making (retrospective). Individuals can be active participants in constructing the environment they are

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trying to make sense of (enactive of sensible environments). They can make sense of something either individually, or as part of a larger social group (social). The sense-making process has no beginning and no end (ongoing). It is an iterative process and can be influenced by the cues individuals chose to focus on in the environment around them (focused on and by extracted cues). Finally, sense-making is not about truth or getting it right. It is a about creating a story that is plausible and then continually refining it with more data and observations so that it can withstand criticism (driven by plausibility not accuracy). (Weick, Sutcliff, & Obstfled, 2005).

In addition to Karl Weick, a number of other researchers have provided their own theories and interpretations of sense-making. Dervin (1998), whose research centers on communication and the design of communication systems, uses the sense-making frame to investigate the interconnectedness between knowledge management and sense-making. Dervin states, “One of the premises of sense-making is that there is an inherent intertwined connection between how you look at a situation and what sense of it you are able to construct of it” (p. 11).

The focus of this research was grounded in the field of education and policy implementation using sense-making as a frame. Weick and Dervin, among others, provide a broad contextual multidisciplinary research framework to understand sense-making; however, this research seeks to weave a historical understanding of sense-making with a more contemporary understanding of the factors that contribute to sense-making in the educational policy implementation context. More specifically, the research examined sense-making and turnaround policy through the eyes of multiple policy implementers.

Contemporary implementation research builds on the work of previous decades but has expanded the field to include the study of three key dimensions in policy design: goals, targets and tools. Other researchers have then begun to offer additional theories such as the role of “co-construction” in policy

implementation (Datnow, 2006), policy implementation and cognition (Spillane, Reiser & Gomez, 2006), policy implementation as organizational learning (Honig, 2006), policy implementation as a political process (Malen, 2006), and the role of social capital in policy implementation (Smylie & Evans, 2006), all contributing to an evolving definition of sense-making and its role in policy implementation. The concept of sense-making is essential to this study, as we hoped to gain insight into how policy implementers of the state turnaround legislation make sense of the policy, and what implications their sense-making might have on how they go about implementing the policy to reach policy goals. The sections below provide further detail about the various components of sense-making as identified in the literature.

**Construction and cognition.** The frame begins with a look at how implementers receive education policy information and make sense of it in light of existing knowledge. Spillane, Reiser and Gomez, (2006) talk about sense-making in terms of a “reconstruction” of knowledge for the change implementer. “What is paramount is not simply that implementing agents choose to respond to the policy but also what they understand themselves to be responding to” (Spillane et al., 2006, p. 49).

When an implementer encounters new research or policy, they combine it with their existing knowledge and experience to construct new knowledge. It is this interaction between old knowledge and new information where one creates an understanding of the policy. Relating to the effective practices described in the literature review above, the role of prior knowledge may be particularly pertinent. Educators typically have a knowledge base about what good practice looks like, including best practices around instruction and leadership. When they encounter policy that dictates certain ways to turn around a school, that prior knowledge would interact with the policy and inform how the implementer makes sense of the policy and the corresponding work. Spillane et al. (2006) further describe this as cognition. “From a cognitive perspective, implementation hinges on whether and in what ways local implementing agents' understanding of policy demands impacts the extent to which they reinforce or alter their



practice” (p. 47). Spillane et al. (2006) argue that understanding is only one discrete factor. How individuals view the world, the beliefs they hold and how their expectations influence their actions also contribute to their sense-making. They further argue that learning a new idea may not be sufficient in and of itself, particularly in the context of reform and restructuring. New ideas may be in danger of being modified or ignored if they are filtered through the same existing knowledge schemas that already exist.

Spillane et al. (2006) offer a caveat about interpretation of policy given one’s preexisting level of expertise. If one’s understanding is limited to the superficial aspects of the policy or embodies only a rudimentary level of expertise in complex policy implementation, they may miss the core concepts of the policy and focus entirely on what is similar to their previous experience, leading to a familiar but ultimately shallow interpretation. The expertise one brings to their interpretation of a given policy determines their ability to identify key elements of the policy. Because implementation decisions are influenced by this sense-making, the interaction between expertise and policy sense-making makes a difference in how policy is implemented at the ground level (Spillane et al., 2006).

Datnow (2006) argues that this knowledge is also “co-constructed” with other members of the policy chain. Co-construction relies on multi-directionality, since over time the different implementers influence each other during the interactions that take place. While policy implementation tends to assume a linear process, in reality, implementation is not so much a linear process but one that takes on varying directions. It is the interactions between implementers that lead to these various directions and help implementers construct an understanding of the policy. Here, the role of communication is salient in that it is through communication that people begin to make sense of what they need to do to implement the policy.

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Another critical part of Datnow's (2006) co-construction is that one's understanding of policy is not divorced from the context in which they are implementing policy. She puts forth a concept of a relational sense of context, explaining that, "by this we mean that people's actions cannot be understood apart from the setting in which they are situated, and reciprocally, the setting cannot be understood without understanding the actions of the people within it" (p. 107). When people implement policy, their thinking is shaped by the situation or environment that surrounds them, which in turn influences the actions they take to implement policy. Important to consider when examining policy implementation in education, is how educators make sense of the policy, in the case of this research, turnaround policy, given their existing knowledge and their context.

**Political effect.** Malen (2006) provides a framework and case study for assessing the role of politics on education policy implementation. She argues that implementation is a crucial point in the policy-making process because it is the point where it actually impacts various stakeholders. According to Malen (2006), there are "political exchanges" that occur during implementation that regulate the various interests of stakeholders "because they are value-laden issues that cannot be resolved solely through the acquisition of empirical evidence or the application of technical expertise" (Malen, 2006, p. 83). Relationships amongst various policy implementation actors, although they may or may not acknowledge one another, are forged and impact the degree to which policy is implemented with fidelity, resisted, or subverted. Furthermore, because education policies are deeply value-laden and may require reallocation of resources or question utilization of time, reaching resolution is extremely difficult. The author's framework draws extensively on the idea of "political games" as a metaphor as originally proposed by Bardach's (1977) groundbreaking research. Here Bardach outlined a process various policy implementers go through in order to achieve specific policy goals.

The key components of the educational policy implementation political frame include an analysis of the varied interests of actors and their capacity to influence implementation based on policy currency,

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and the influence of social and institutional context on implementation. Malen (2006) explains that policy implementation literature overwhelmingly identifies “policy dilution” as a major theme. In this instance, the varied interests of implementers erode social reform. The author further adds:

Even at the local level, deeply rooted traditions of incremental decision making and broadly held views about occupational survival may prompt district officials to select and enact policies that “attract...notice” and enhance legitimacy, but do not alter fundamentally, the orientations and operations of the school system (Malen, 2006, p. 97).

For Malen, the political frame can provide unique insights into policy implementation and, as the above quotation indicates, various political phenomena and “political games” played by policy implementers can greatly influence policy outcomes. The insights are key in understanding the interface between actor’s interests and resources, and policy initiatives, premises and outcomes.

**Social capital.** Smylie and Evans (2006) provide insight on the impact social capital can have on education policy implementation. While social capital is a broad concept, used in various disciplines and contexts, for the purposes of this study we adopt the definition of social capital as developed by Smylie and Evans. The authors define social capital an “intangible and abstract resource...[that can act as an agent] to promote certain behaviors within social structures and it can be accumulated and drawn on to achieve otherwise hard to attain objectives.” (Smylie & Evans, 2006, p. 189). For Smylie and Evans, social capital contains three major components, including “social trust, channels of communication, and norms, expectations, and sanctions” (p. 189-190). Trust can determine the extent to which individuals in organization want to collaborate with one another, based on their confidence in their colleagues, in order to achieve policy goals. The flow of communication is essential as successfully reaching any goal requires access to new information and furthermore requires individuals to communicate with one another. Finally, norms, expectations and sanctions can influence the extent to which individuals are

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praised or reprimanded for their actions based on intangible predetermined community standards.

Within these confines, Smylie and Evans argue that social capital can greatly impact policy implementation and the attainment of policy goals.

At the onset the authors note that implementation research has long known that the will and capacity of implementers and how they navigate the local context could negatively impact policy outcomes (p. 189). The authors argue that social capital can have a positive or negative impact on implementation. “Social capital is not social interaction per se. Social capital is ‘produced’ through social interaction” (p. 189). Furthermore, social capital can be divided into two components, “trust” and “channels of communication.” These components have implications on policy implementation because of the open or closed nature of relationships based on trust can impact whether or not an idea, program, or initiative will thrive.

The authors note that while strong social capital can be key to policy implementation, it can also act as a conserving force, where entrenched philosophies developed through shared norms and experiences can impede policy implementation (Smylie & Evans, 2006). They reviewed research conducted by the Chicago Annenberg Research Institute. The Chicago Annenberg Challenge was a five-year study of decentralized reform initiatives involving efforts between schools and external partners. Smylie and Evans (2006) note that this study was not necessarily on social capital itself, but that it can be used as a window through which to understand the role of social capital in the implementation of initiatives. Based on the outcomes of the Annenberg Challenge, they concluded that both the initial level of social resources and the nature of and ability to sustain relationships with external partners were two determining factors indicating strong social capital, which supported implementation. Schools that began with a stronger base of social resources valued teacher collaboration and had an orientation toward trust, innovation, and owning student success or failure. Some of the external partners in the Annenberg Challenge schools found it difficult to sustain relationships and communicate effectively

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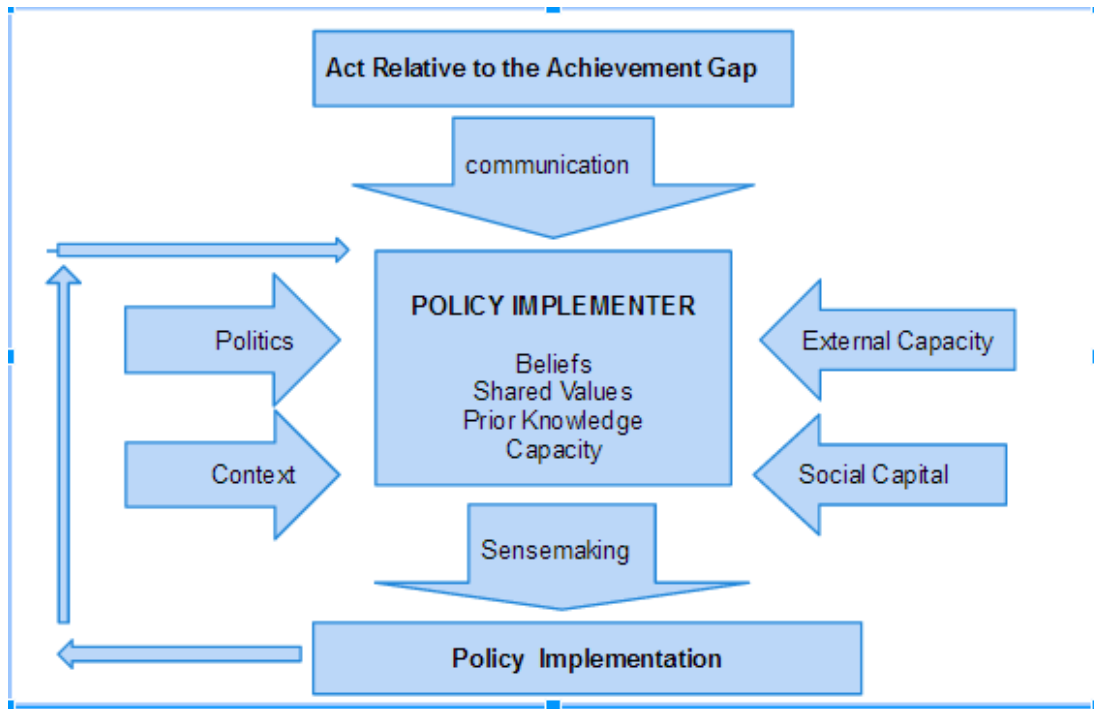
with teachers in some schools, which led to groups of teachers using social capital to inhibit the success of reform efforts. The authors conclude their article by arguing that social capital is something that researchers should continue to pay attention to, as it can aid or inhibit the success of policy implementation.

The above-mentioned components of policy sense-making each have a unique impact on how policy is implemented throughout school districts. Whether at the level of the school board, superintendent/central office, principal and leadership teams, or amongst school faculty, construction and cognition, the impact of politics, and the impact of social capital can all substantially affect policy outcomes. Understanding this is important and helpful for district and school leaders since time and resources are limited. The stakes are high and the impact of not carefully considering how all of these elements work together and how they shape policy implementation could be a determining factor in the attainment of policy goals. This could mean that chronically underperforming schools fail to improve within the three-year timeframe as outlined within the State Legislation (2010). Moreover, as we outlined in the introduction to this study, for communities and cities that are relying on school and district leaders to produce educated and productive graduates, failure to turnaround schools has a large impact society. Therefore this study aimed to gain insight into what it takes to “get it right,” which is an essential concern of this state’s school and district leaders with Level D schools.

### **Theoretical Frame Synthesis**

The theory frames outlined above are represented in the graphic below.

Figure 1.1 Theoretical Framework for how sense-making impacts Turnaround Policy implementation.



The turnaround policy acts as the trigger that begins the process that may ultimately lead to the goal, improved student achievement. As the policy reaches the policy implementers, a number of factors influence how the implementers make sense of the policy. As outlined by Honig (2006), the implementers' beliefs, knowledge and perceptions of their own capacity to implement the policy come into play. This likely includes prior knowledge about effective practices to turn around underperforming schools. Karl Weick (1995) outlines the process policy implementers may go through in trying to understand a policy and maintains that this process is iterative. He argues that who, what, why, and a person's past can impact their understanding of policy. Dervin (1998) explains the link between a subject's understanding of a policy and their ability to construct meaning. Spillane et al. (2006) point out cognition is dependent upon one's ability to understand a policy and alter their practice as a result. He and his colleagues argue that it's not enough to be able to grasp new ideas because learning new ideas using old schemas can be deleterious to success. Datnow (2006) argues that this knowledge is also "co-constructed" amongst implementers who are responsible for the policy. She further adds that implementer actions cannot be divorced from their context, and consequently the context is better

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understood by assessing the impact of implementer actions on the context. This means that the implementers actions continuously changes context and therefore context can be better understood through study of implementer cognition. Malen (2006) provides insight into the types of political exchanges that take place and the effect they might have on decisions around time and resource. Malen argues that actions and decisions can become high stakes and uses the concept of “political games” to describe the impact of politics on policy implementation. Smylie and Evans (2006) note that social capital has a significant impact on policy implementation. They add that social capital is not defined as simple human interaction, but instead intentional interactions between implementers. In this context, social capital can be divided into two categories, trust and communication. Externally the context in which the implementers operate, the influence of politics, and social processes they engage in make sense of the policy. The perception that there may or may not be external capacity to successfully implement the policy all converge and influence the eventual sense-making the policy implementers make of the original policy. Their understanding guides how the policy will be implemented in the day-to-day context of turnaround schools. Policy implementation then becomes an iterative process that is ongoing, constantly refined and modified by new knowledge, new emotions and new understanding or sense-making (Weick, 1995).

### **Research Gap**

Ample literature exists around efforts to turn around underperforming schools. This includes a wide range of research studies that look at how schools are able to raise the level of performance of their students in challenging contexts. Studies have shown how certain practices contribute to successful school turnaround. Yet, not all of these studies look at turnaround in terms of policies that dictate the turnaround process. In this state the legislation mandates that schools designated as turnaround schools need to comply with specific requirements to raise student academic achievement. This informs turnaround work in ways that have not yet been addressed in the literature. A critical part of this

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research is that turnaround policies dictate turnaround efforts to occur within a relatively short timeframe (e.g. 3 years). However, researchers' descriptions of all the elements that go into making sense of any policy suggest this to be a complex and perhaps lengthy process. This research study not only addressed the gap in the literature about making sense of turnaround policy and how it influences implementation, but also considered the fact that the policy only allows three years to turn around a school. The gap in turnaround research exists at the intersection of practices that are shown to turn around an underperforming school and turnaround policy implementation.

Another body of literature looks at the role of policy sense-making in policy implementation. Focused on policy implementers, this sense-making includes internal or individual processes (e.g. reconstruction of knowledge) and external influences (e.g. co-construction and politics). Research studies have examined how sense-making has worked with specific policies. In these studies, researchers were able to get a glimpse into the sense-making process in the context of actual policy implementation. However, research on sense-making with this specific turnaround policy is lacking. This is a matter of practical and urgent importance to school districts across the state as all stakeholders within the school community are concerned with improving chronically underperforming schools. With the high stakes nature of this turnaround school reform effort, the way in which district leaders understand the legislation will significantly impact the educational success for thousands of students throughout the state.

Successful policy implementation may be dependent upon understanding the policy at face value and district leaders ensuring that the political context, shared values, capacity, and colleague sense-making do not negatively impact implementation. Getting it right could mean positive outcomes for students and schools that have chronically underperformed, which would ultimately lead to increased student achievement and a change in classification from level D to level C and beyond. The stakes are high as unsuccessful implementation could mean schools and districts become level F, and risk state



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take over. More importantly, unsuccessful implementation results in inferior education, which is detrimental to individuals, families, the state, and the nation.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology<sup>3</sup>**

#### **The Community Context**

The city, which is the site of this research study, is located in the Northeast and its history and development has followed a path similar to that of most beleaguered industrial mill towns—intense growth and dramatic decline followed by fits and starts at resurgence. Geography and the immediate access to both a port of entry and water power from nearby rivers made the community a desirable location for bringing in raw materials, manufacturing them into goods, and redistributing them out via the port to other parts of the country. At the height of its power, the city employed more than 30,000 workers. Thousands of immigrants arrived during the boom period between 1865 and 1923, coming primarily from Ireland, England, Scotland and Italy as well as Canada, Portugal and the Azores. As each immigrant group arrived, they proudly claimed certain parts of the city as their own, most settling in triple decker units built by mill owners and usually under the spire of a Catholic church. Portuguese immigrants, settled in tight knit communities that allowed residents to maintain their language, culture and traditions. In 1920, the population of the community was 120,485, primarily of European descent. Not unlike many mill cities throughout the country, the city foresaw a bright and long future for its residents and its community. The city's decline would be dramatic and difficult to reverse. It began with the Depression of the 1930s, followed by the closing of mills and manufacturing plants in the 1940s and 1950s. An attempt at urban renewal in the 1960s and 1970s created housing and infrastructure but demolished some close-knit communities in the process. Globalization, economic hardship, rising unemployment, crime, drugs and failing schools plagued the city through the 1980s, 1990s and into the 2000s.

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<sup>3</sup> This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Jamie Chisum, Anna Cross, and Jill Geiser.

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The city's population has steadily declined from its peak in 1920 to 89,220. The vast majority (87 percent) continues to identify themselves as having European ancestry, but a growing percentage of the population (29.6 percent) report Latin America, Asia and Africa as their region of birth. Based on the 2010 Census data, 26 percent of the foreign-born population entered the United States in 2000 or later. About 34.2 percent of the households speak a language other than English in the home, and 21.4 percent of the residents live below the poverty level, double the poverty level for the state. According to a recent study, the poverty rate for children under 18 is 33.3 percent, which means that one in every three children in the city is currently living in poverty. Many live as renters in multi-unit structures, remnants of the housing stock created for mill workers. In terms of educational attainment, 32.5 percent of the adults over the age of 25 do not hold a high school diploma, a mere 14.1 percent of the adults over 25 hold a bachelors degree or higher. This is a city under stress, which has struggled to maintain its identity and its pride. The school system is seen as a key ingredient to improve the quality of life for its residents and restore the economic future of the city.

### **The LEA Context**

In recent years turning around the city has focused on turning around the public school system. The LEA has an enrollment of 10,138 students. Over the last ten years the demographics of the student population has changed both socio-economically and racially. This is significant in that the school system has had to respond to this rapidly shifting demographic as it has worked to turn around the schools.

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Table 1: LEA Demographic Shifts from 2003 to 2013

<b>Population Category</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2013</b>
White	77.3%	63.3%
Hispanic	9.0%	19.9%
African American	8.1%	7.0%
Native American	0.6%	0.3%
Asian	5.1%	4.5%
Low-Income	50.9%	77.9%
English Language Learners	5.5%	7.1%
Students w/ Disabilities	14.8%	22.4%

In 2003 the student population was 77.3 percent white, 9 percent Hispanic, 5.1 percent Asian, 8.1 percent African American, and .6 percent Native American. Since 2003, the Hispanic population has more than doubled to 19.9 percent, the white population has declined to 63.3 percent, and the percent of African American, Asian and Native American students has remained relatively constant. The percentages of students who are considered selected populations under state indicators has also changed over the years. The percentages of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch increased from 60.5 in 2007 to 77.9 in 2013. Increases are also noted in the percentages of students whose first language is not English and of students with disabilities. In 2013, the state added a new category to its annual statistics, the percentage of students in the LEA who qualify as “high needs,” who constitute 81.5 percent of the students who attend the public schools in this LEA.

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Two other notable areas of demographics were the graduation and drop-out rates which exceed that of the state. Interestingly, the largest attrition rate between grades occurs at grade 8 with 32.9 percent of the students choosing to leave the schools.

Table 2: LEA and State 2012 4-Year Graduation and Drop-Out Rates

	LEA		State	
Population Category	% Graduated	% Dropped Out	% Graduated	% Dropped Out
All Students	69	17.9	84.7	6.9
Male	61.5	23.1	81.8	8
Female	76.8	12.5	87.7	5.7
ELL	44.1	23.5	61.1	18.9
Students w/ Disabilities	35.7	34.3	68.6	12.8
Low Income	64.2	20.6	72.4	13.2
African American	70.1	14.9	73.4	11.3
Asian	90.9	4.5	89.5	3.9
Hispanic	60.8	25.5	65.5	18.1
White	69.6	17	89.7	4.3

This table shows the 4-year high school graduation rate to be 69 percent. The high school dropout rate at 17.9 percent is almost double that of the state average of 6.9 percent. The largest groups to drop out of

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high school are English Language Learners (ELL) students, Hispanic and Latino students, and students with disabilities. Males drop out of high schools at more than double the rate of females. These are challenging statistics as they reflect a school system that struggles to serve a diverse student population.

Over the past several years, this LEA has been focused on turning around its underperforming schools. Schools have moved in and out of turnaround status, with some showing significant gains in student achievement and others not.

Table 3: 2013 LEA Schools and Their Accountability and Assistance Levels

<b>School</b>	<b>School Type</b>	<b>Title I Status</b>	<b>Accountability and Assistance Level</b>
School 1	Elementary	Non-Title I School	Level A
School 2	Elementary	Title I School	Level C
School 3	Elementary	Title I School	Level C
School 4	Elementary	Title I School	Level C
School 5	Elementary	Title I School	Insufficient data
School 6	Elementary	Title I School	Level A
School 7	Elementary	Non-Title I School	Level A
School 8	Elementary	Non-Title I School	Level C
School 9	Elementary	Title I School	Level D

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School 10	Elementary-Middle	Title I School	Level B
School 11	Middle	Title I School	Level C
School 12 (School was closed spring 2013)	Middle	Title I School	Level D
School 13	Middle	Non-Title I School	Level C
School 14	Middle	Title I School	Level A
School 15	Middle	Title I School	Insufficient data
School 16	High	Title I School	Insufficient data
School 17	High	Non-Title I School	Level C

There are total of 16 schools in the LEA (with one school that closed in spring 2013). One of the high schools listed here is one of the top ten largest high schools in the state with an enrollment of 2276. In addition, there are nine elementary schools, three middle schools, one pre-K through grade 7 school, one therapeutic high school, and one therapeutic middle school. The LEA is considered a level D system by the state, a designation that results from one or more schools in the LEA failing to meet student achievement goals relative to student performance on the state assessment system. Presently, there are four level A schools, one level B school, seven level C schools and one level D school.

State intervention under NCLB began in the LEA as far back as 2004 when two middle schools were the first in the state to be designated as “chronically underperforming” based on their state

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assessment data. Over the next several years, the achievement levels of the schools were in flux, moving between periods of growth and decline. When the 2010 state turnaround legislation was passed, those two schools, along with a third, the pre-k through grade 7 school, received level D designation, which threw them into a rigorous turnaround process. Growth occurred in two of these schools over the three-year turnaround process and both schools were exited out of turnaround status in 2013. Indeed, both schools showed such significant gains that one moved to level B and the other to level A. In the meantime, the third school that was originally designated a level D school in 2010, showed a decline in student achievement over the three year period. For that school, there was impending threat of level F designation, which would have meant state takeover. With that level F designation a possibility, the LEA decided to close that school in spring 2013 and transfer its staff and students to other schools in the system. While these schools were nearing the end of their turnaround process, another school was emerging on the horizon for turnaround status. That school was in level C when it declined to level D status in 2013. At the time of this research study, that school had just embarked on the turnaround process.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative design was chosen for this study because this methodology is best used to address a research problem in which the variables may be unknown, the literature may be limited and the researcher may need to develop a deeper understanding of the central phenomenon by exploring the research questions with participants (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative methodology allowed an in-depth exploration into the research questions: How do implementers' (superintendent/central office, building leaders, teachers, school board members) make sense of state turnaround policy? How does this sense-making influence policy implementation? What factors influence implementer sense-making?



### Case Study Design

Case study design was used to explore the sense-making of various stakeholders implementing the turnaround process as mandated by the state turnaround legislation. Merriam (2009) notes, “the case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon” (p. 50). Yin (2009) explains that the case study approach to research is used “...to understand a real-life phenomenon in depth, but such understanding encompassed important contextual conditions—because they were highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study...” (p. 18). Given the complexity of sense-making as outlined previously, the case study approach allowed the researchers to understand how implementation occurred in a specific LEA that was undergoing turnaround work as dictated by the policy. Yin (2009) discusses various applications of the case study research design, one of which is a description of a real-life intervention and its context. As noted in the literature review, efforts to improve chronically underperforming schools have been chronicled in many research studies. This research offers a unique view of the role of sense-making by looking at this process through the lens of the implementation of turnaround policy with the aim to improve school performance. In this case, the intervention was the turnaround policy and the context was the LEA where implementers were required to put that policy into action. Here, the context became an important part of this research and, given this, we looked to the case study approach as one which would produce information that would lead to a deeper understanding of turnaround policy implementation.

**Single case study.** Having established the case study as the overall design, this study investigated the research questions through a single case study method. The research focused on one LEA, which was identified through the process described in the Unit of Analysis section below. Yin (2009) points out that single case studies may be representative cases, or “typical” cases, of a given phenomenon. As a single case study, this research examined the implementation of turnaround policy in

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an LEA as representative of the process of implementation. We were interested in looking at these implementation questions in-depth in one LEA. A single case study allowed for a deeper understanding of how each stakeholder group made sense of the turnaround policy and how that sense-making influenced their decisions and actions around policy implementation. In addition, a single case study was more feasible for this study given limitations in access to turnaround LEA's and time allotted for data collection.

**Unit of analysis.** Included in a single case study approach was the need to identify the unit of analysis as well as the theory development. Where the unit of analysis is defined by your “case,” the theory provides a potential explanation of the phenomenon that the researchers use to approach their data collection and analysis (Yin, 2009). This research examined how turnaround work was implemented according to the state turnaround legislation. This policy identifies turnaround schools through specific criteria and designates those schools as level D schools. Local education agencies (LEA) that have at least one of their schools designated as a level D school are then designated level D LEA's and are required to implement the turnaround policy. For this research, the unit of analysis was a specified level D LEA where the process of implementing turnaround policy was in process.

### **Sampling**

There were two levels of sampling for this research study: LEA and implementer selection.

**LEA sampling.** Because the unit of analysis was the LEA, the one selected for this study was a level D LEA that was in the process of implementing the turnaround policy. Therefore, purposeful sampling was used in order to intentionally select a site to learn about the central phenomenon of turnaround policy implementation (Creswell, 2012). At the time of selection, there were ten level D LEA's in the state. Of the ten, two were eliminated due to researcher affiliation. Of the remaining eight, one level D LEA was chosen based on the following criteria:

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- 1) Access to implementers in the LEA was available.
- 2) The superintendent was willing to participate in and support the research.
- 3) The LEA was in the process of implementing the turnaround policy in a level D school.
- 4) The LEA had active participation in policy implementation by all four of the stakeholder groups identified in this study (superintendent/central office, school leadership, teachers, school board members).

**Participant sampling.** Participants for interviews in this study were selected to provide data about the role of the implementers, which each of the researchers were researching in individual sections: superintendent/central office personnel, building leaders, teachers, and school board members. (Interview methodology is discussed below in the data collection section.) Each of the individual studies had specific sampling approaches that were impacted by timing and logistics of data collection. In general, though, the participant sampling for this study included purposeful and snowball sampling. We went into data collection with a preference for random sampling because, as Creswell (2012) states, the benefit of random sampling is that those that participate are representative of the population under study. However, when we made initial contact with the LEA, we found that time constraints precluded our ability to use random sampling. We had limited time to conduct interviews and, therefore relied on purposeful and snowball sampling for the selection of interviewees. Purposeful sampling was used when certain implementers were chosen because their role gave them a specific perspective on turnaround implementation that might have been different from other implementers. Snowball sampling was used when educators in the LEA recommended implementers after data collection began. As Creswell (2012) notes, snowball sampling is often used when it is difficult to know at the outset of the study, which individuals should participate. In this study, it was difficult to know which implementers would be willing to participate and snowball sampling allowed the researchers to identify willing participants.

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For the umbrella group study, purposeful sampling was used to identify the LEA, which the researchers did jointly. For each of the individual studies, participant sampling may have involved either purposeful or snowball sampling. These sampling approaches are further described in each of the individual studies.

### **Data Collection**

A key part of data collection in this case study research involved the use of multiple sources of evidence. With multiple sources of data, triangulation can be applied, which in turn can bolster findings and lead to more convincing conclusions (Yin, 2009). For this case study research, evidence came from three sources of data: document analysis, interviews, and observations.

**Document analysis.** The data collection methods began with document and video analysis. Creswell (2012) lauds the use of documents to provide valuable evidence in qualitative research. Yin (2009) echoes the benefit of documents in case studies, stating that they are unobtrusive in that they are not the result of the case study itself and that they contain exact details of an event. The document analysis in this research started with an analysis of the state turnaround legislation. The policy was outlined and dissected to frame the turnaround process that the LEA was implementing. Further document analysis included some of the LEA's own turnaround plans that were written in compliance with the policy as well as state monitoring documents. Historical documents, media reports, and LEA demographic and achievement data were included to help gain a deeper understanding of the context. Documents reviewed included meeting minutes of school board meetings. Because some of these minutes were in the form of a video recording, document review went beyond actual documents to include some review of recordings. Any document analysis that pertained to individual studies is also described in those sections.

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**Interviews.** Interviews were conducted to understand implementers' interpretation of the turnaround policy. According to Yin (2009), interviews help to provide insight into human affairs or behavioral events as well as the opinions and attitudes to explain such behavioral events. For this research, the behavioral event was the implementation of the policy and interviews aimed to understand those events and accompanying implementers' attitudes and opinions. This allowed the researchers to analyze how implementer groups interpreted the policy and used that interpretation to inform their implementation decisions.

This research study used semi-structured interviews. Patton (2002) discusses the various types of interviews, noting one structure where an interview guide may be used to provide guidance regarding the questions asked, while leaving room for probing. Interview guides provide the same basic lines of inquiry for all interviews; yet, interviewers may be spontaneous about how to word questions during the interview. A systematic approach for multiple interviews, the interview guide is a framework that outlines the questions to be asked, the sequence of questions and the questions to be explored further (Patton, 2002). An interview guide (See Appendix E) was used to allow us the flexibility to be more personal with our interviewees, which increased our likelihood of gathering valid data. For this research study, interviews were semi-structured, which focused on how subjects interpreted the policy and how that interpretation influenced how they implemented turnaround.

Interviews were conducted by each of the researchers using the same interview process. We each conducted 6 to 10 interviews for each of our implementer groups, which lasted between 30 and 90 minutes each. A total of 29 implementers were interviewed across the four groups—central office personnel, school board members, school leaders, and teachers. The interview process began with a consent form signed by the participant (See Appendix C). The interviews were then conducted using a protocol (See Appendices D and F). Interviews were recorded for participants who granted permission and then transcribed verbatim. The research team was sensitive to the fact that the people working in

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this turnaround LEA were in a potentially vulnerable situation, both professionally and personally, as there is often a stigma associated with working in a LEA with a level D designation. The consent form for participants in the study included language that allowed individuals to opt out of the study or end the interview at any time without loss or penalty. The consent form also gave flexibility for the participant to choose not to answer any individual question. The researchers attempted to craft the interview questions to be sensitive to the vulnerability of participants.

**Field test.** The methodology also addressed the need to ensure the interview questions would yield information needed to respond to the overall research questions. As we constructed the interview questions, we considered the different domains of our research questions and the kinds of language within each question that would allow significant and pertinent data to emerge. Yet, one of the concerns was whether the questions would allow this to happen. Weiss (1994) discusses the benefits of piloting interviews as a field test, which may indicate where the interview questions are redundant or over weighted in one area and lacking in another. It can also show where questions are confusing. With this in mind, we tested the interview questions once with a teacher who was working in a Level D school in a LEA that was not a part of this study. We then convened to determine if such redundancy or lacking existed and, from there, made any needed revisions. We went into data collection with a set of interview questions we believed would yield the data we needed to address the research questions. However, when we began the interviews, we found that we needed to adjust questions to better elicit information related to the research questions. Some of the adjustments depended on the implementer groups and are described in the individual studies where pertinent.

**Observations.** Another data collection tool we used were observations. Observations are useful in research to document information as it occurs in a specific setting and analyzes actual behavior (Creswell, 2012). For this research, observations helped the researchers gain insight into how people processed the ideas put forth by the policy around turnaround work and how they behaved in terms of

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implementing these policy ideas. Yin (2009) distinguishes between formal observations and casual data collection activities. Formal observations entail observing meetings or other school activities, whereas casual data collection may come from site visits in the context of conducting interviews. We used observation data obtained casually in the context of interviewing as well as data from formal observations. Formal observations took place at school board meetings and one local stakeholder group meeting. For these, we followed Creswell's (2012) suggestion for observation protocol and used one that was designed to allow for a description of the chronological order of events along with a reflection about themes and quotes. We were non-participant observers and took field notes either during or after the observation. Creswell (2012) emphasizes the importance of descriptive and reflective field notes, which involve a description of events along with personal thoughts and insights of the observer. Our field notes included both descriptive and reflective elements. Field notes were then analyzed alongside the transcriptions from interviews. The role of observations in data collection differed for each of the individual studies and is described in more detail in those sections where applicable.

### **Data Analysis**

When analyzing the data, the focus was on extracting data that pertained to the role of each of the implementers of the turnaround policy. For this, we used a coding process that allowed key themes to emerge from the data.

**Coding.** Coding was the first step in our analysis of the data. We coded the interviews once they were transcribed by an outside agency. Creswell (2012) outlines a coding process for interview data that includes reading through transcriptions, identifying codes, and collapsing codes into themes. The analysis of interview data in this research used this coding process in order to center on key themes, which emerged across the interviews. Miles and Huberman (1994) discuss the benefits of using a "start list" for coding, which is created prior to fieldwork. The "start list" contains a list of codes that is devised from the conceptual framework, research questions, hypotheses, problem areas and any other

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important variables. Our “start list” included codes such as collaboration, making sense, communication, student impact, and reflection, among others, and we used this “start list” (See Appendix B) to begin the coding process.

Once interviews were transcribed, the coding process began by looking at the transcriptions with the “start list” as a backdrop. That is, we began our analysis according to which information was consistent with the codes on the start list. We quickly realized that while some of the codes on the start list were useful, there were several concepts that were not represented on our list. Therefore, we made adjustments to the list of codes, adding codes and deleting others. As a group, we established a list of parent codes at the beginning. As individual researchers proceeded through their coding, they added child codes to the parent codes where needed. We used the qualitative research software, Dedoose, to code transcripts and to organize our codes.

**Collaborative coding.** The group process utilized in the analysis was key in this research study. Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997) describe the process of consensual qualitative research (CQR) where a team of researchers engages in the process of co-analyzing data. CQR “...highlights the use of multiple researchers, the process of reaching consensus, and a systematic way of examining the representativeness of results across cases” (p. 519). It occurs in three main steps where researchers divide the data into domains, then construct core ideas within the domains and finally cross analyze to identify consistencies across cases. While the analysis portion of this research study did not necessarily follow these steps verbatim, the underlying tenet that informs CQR was pertinent here.

Team members first examine the data independently and then come together to present and discuss their ideas until they reach a single unified version that all team members endorse as the best representation of the data. Using several researchers provides a variety of opinions and perspectives, helps to circumvent the biases of any one person,



and is helpful for capturing the complexity of the data (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997, p. 523).

The group process for this research followed a modified version of CQR, which provided a structure for the group to code the data together, then to analyze the data individually. As a collaborative research study, we analyzed one transcript together to determine how to use the codes from the coding list. From there, we made further adjustments to the list of codes and established the use of parent and child codes. We agreed that it was possible for individual researchers to use some codes and not others, depending on their implementer group. Once we calibrated our coding practices, we coded our interviews individually, and then convened to compare our coding and to check our calibration. Once all interview transcriptions were coded and individual sections analyzed, we joined together to identify overarching themes that cut across implementer groups and drew conclusions and potential implications for turnaround LEA's. Because there were four researchers looking at the data, interrater reliability was significant. This process of calibrating through co-analyzing the data assisted with interrater reliability.

**Document analysis.** As Yin (2009) points out, information from documents should be corroborated and augmented by evidence from other sources. Documents were examined for specific details that were not obtained through other sources. The state turnaround legislation had already been analyzed prior to data collection to gain an understanding of the requirements of level D schools. Beyond the policy, other documents that were analyzed were documents related to turnaround work, including the LEA Accelerated Improvement Plan, LEA Recovery Plan, and a level D school's School Redesign Grant (SRG) Monitoring Site Visit. We also reviewed media material as well as LEA performance data to understand the context within which the turnaround occurred. Consistent with Yin's (2009) description, document analysis in this research was not intended to provide definitive findings, but rather to allow for inferences to be made that could lead to further investigation via other sources of evidence. In this study, document analysis served to develop further understanding of the LEA, which

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provided context for the findings. Document analysis beyond the policy itself involved different roles in each of the individual studies and is described where applicable.

**Drawing conclusions.** As we analyzed the data, one way we tested our conclusions was through structural corroboration. Eisner (1976) highlights the importance of structural corroboration in his discussion about educational criticism.

Structural corroboration is a process that seeks to validate or support one's conclusions about a set of phenomena by demonstrating how a variety of facts or conditions within the phenomena support the conclusions drawn. It is a process of demonstrating that the story hangs together, that the pieces fit. (p. 148)

Although Eisner refers to the process of validating the evaluation of educational practice, this concept applies to the analysis of data in this study. Because we were intent on ensuring conclusions were substantiated through the data, we compared what interviewees said about the various issues within the research topic, with each other, and with observational and document data. Through this comparison of data, we were able to understand how individual pieces of data fit together in order to lead to coherent conclusions, particularly relative to the overall recommendations.

### **Limitations**

The major limitations of this qualitative research were researcher bias, generalizability, and reliability. We discuss below how these limitations were addressed through the methodology.

**Researcher bias.** The role of researcher bias was a consideration in this study, particularly since all of the researchers currently hold positions as practicing educators responsible for the implementation of education policy. In at least two cases, researchers were specifically responsible for the implementation of school turnaround policy. A key component of qualitative research is that it values

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direct observation and data gathered from interactions between the researcher and the research subject. The researcher becomes a research instrument and therefore brings their own lens to the data collection and analysis. Yin (2011) argues that, “No lens is free of bias; every lens has subjective and objective qualities” (p. 270). Researchers must maintain a high degree of awareness and self-reflection about the qualities of any “lens” that might influence either the collection or analysis of the data. In particular, use of interviews as a source of evidence in qualitative research can strengthen the data collection process as it allows for targeted questioning. However, it also has inherent weaknesses of bias in self-reporting, recalling inaccuracies due to time-lapse, and reflexivity, where the participants report what the interviewer wants to hear (Yin, 2009).

Miles and Huberman (1994) identify two additional sources of researcher bias: (a) the effects of the researcher on the case and (b) the effects of the case on the researcher. In the first case, the presence of the researcher can serve as a disruption to the relationships and dynamics that exist in an institution. In the second instance, the researcher can be seduced by the environment or the participants. As a result, they might draw conclusions or inferences that may be influenced by the bias they have developed rather than the facts and data they have collected. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend several strategies to mitigate the effects of bias (a) and bias (b) such as: seeking feedback from colleagues on potential areas of bias by sharing field notes and observations, purposefully selecting participants who represent dissident voices, maintaining a focus on the research questions to avoid becoming distracted by other leads, and paying attention to the possible effects the interview location or the interview process itself may have on data collection. With these recommendations in mind, through the collaborative coding process, we discussed at length the themes we were identifying and where our bias may have filtered in. This helped us to keep our analysis as close to the data as possible, without being heavily influenced by our biases. In addition, we had dissident voices in our selection of participants, which we incorporated

into our analysis. Similar to the data collection methods, bias is addressed more specifically in each of the individual sections.

**Generalizability.** One criticism of a single case study approach is that external validity is weak because the findings may not be generalizable. In comparing single and multiple case studies, Yin (2009) cautions that using a single case study could have less weight than multiple case studies and perhaps offer less theoretical replication. As we began to design this single LEA case study, we knew that generalizability could have been an issue in that the findings may not have been clearly applicable to other LEA's going through the turnaround process as required by policy, because conditions between LEA's vary. This dissertation-in-practice research brought in the use of theory to help address this limitation of external validity.

The theory centered on the relationship between policy sense-making and implementation in the context of turning around an underperforming school. That is, the complexity of the process of policy sense-making, as previously outlined in the theoretical frame of this research, along with the inherent difficulties of chronically underperforming schools, challenges implementation of that policy by implementers. With this research design, we aimed to understand what it meant to be a school going through the turnaround process through the lens of policy sense-making and implementation. The theory helped to address external validity because the findings might be generalizable to a broader theory that in turn may be applied to other contexts. Yin's (2011) explanation of analytic generalization highlights the importance of the role of theory in the study in terms of generalizing the findings.

The argument needs to be cast in relation to existing research literature, not the specific conditions in the actual study. In other words, the goal is to pose the proposition and hypotheses at a conceptual level higher than that of the specific findings (Typically, this higher level might have been needed to justify the research importance to study the chosen topic in the first place) (p. 101).

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Also helpful to the validity question was how the researchers describe the case. Merriam (1998) discusses ways of addressing validity, including providing a rich, thick description that shows that conclusions are reasonable and make sense. In other words, the more thorough the description of the LEA, the more accurate conclusions would be. The aim of the research was to provide a detailed description in order to support findings drawn from the data, to allow others to make their own connection to the study's conclusions. In this way, the reader would determine to what extent the findings can be transferred based on the thorough description of the context and its findings in the case under study (Merriam, 1998). Through a detailed depiction of the case, this study increased the likelihood the reader would be able to determine whether or not the findings are transferable to another situation where turnaround policy is being implemented.

**Reliability.** For case study research, reliability is achieved through specific documentation of the research process. Yin (2009) points out that case studies that use a protocol and database have stronger reliability. The protocol is the data collection instrument along with a specified set of procedures to be followed. A database is developed from the data collection instruments. Both of these help make it possible for another investigator to replicate the research procedures. This research study used a protocol that outlined the procedures of all data collection instruments, including the interviews, observations and document analysis. We also used the qualitative research software, Dedoose, as our database for interviews, where we were able to code and analysis transcripts.

In addition we ensured our data quality through a rigorous assessment of our analysis and conclusions. Miles and Huberman (1994) offer a model that involves thirteen tactics that will help address this need for a demanding approach to drawing conclusions from the data. These tactics involve a process of checking the quality of the data, analyzing exceptions to patterns, and checking with skepticism emerging explanations. For this study, the researchers focused on the following four tactics:

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- 1) Checking for representativeness - Ensuring that the data coming from your sources is representative of both confirming and dissident voices;
- 2) Weighting the evidence - Accounting for the fact that some sources provide stronger data in the analysis based on the participants' roles, knowledge about the turnaround policy, and their level of involvement in the work of turning around the school. This weighting of evidence may differ in the analysis of each individual section because we each focused on a different implementer group.
- 3) Checking the meaning of outliers - Scrutinizing outlying data to make sure that analyses to test the generality of the finding and protect against self-selecting biases;
- 4) Checking out rival explanations - Keeping in mind a few possible explanations until one emerges as more compelling as a result of stronger evidence derived from additional data collection.

These tactics provided a guide for us to analyze the data, identify themes and draw conclusions. Using all of these tactics, along with the CQR collaborative data analysis approach, helped us to ensure the validity of our conclusions and alleviate the biases that may have arisen in our analyses. It also helped us ensure that the narrative we told in the end fit the data we found.

#### **Chapter Four: Superintendent / Central Office As Policy Implementers<sup>4</sup>**

This study will examine the role of the central office under the leadership of the superintendent in turnaround policy implementation, specifically the impact their perceptions have on implementation of district and school turnaround as outlined in the state turnaround legislation passed in 2010. With school level innovation using one of the four prescribed intervention models being the focus of the aforementioned law, most of the research on school turnaround has focused on the actions of school level leadership (Duke & Salmonowicz, 2011; Murphy, 2010). In the last decade, within the larger education reform context, educational researchers have increasingly emphasized the essential role of school district central offices as a key lever in the improvement of underperforming schools (Supovitz, 2006; Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Fullan, 2006; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010).

##### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to learn the extent to which superintendent and central office staff perception regarding turnaround policy has an impact on turnaround policy implementation. It is possible that the superintendent, as the primary and initial enactor of turnaround policy as outlined in state turnaround legislation at the school district level, takes into account a host of considerations including local politics, collective bargaining, cultural context, central office and school capacity, and human capital. State regulations require that any school district that has a designated level D or turnaround school is also labeled a turnaround school district. This being the case, the superintendent has to consider how central office is organized to implement the policy with fidelity, as it has implications for his or her leadership. Further considerations for the superintendent include the perception of central office staff and their capacity and /or willingness to implement (Honig, et. al, 2006). The following research sub-questions emerge:

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1. How does superintendent sense-making impact implementation of turnaround policy?
2. How does central office staff sense-making impact implementation of turnaround policy?

The first question aims to understand the impact of superintendent thinking on implementation of turnaround policy. The second question is directly related to central office staff and the effect their thinking has on turnaround policy implementation. A distinction is made between the two questions because depending on the size of the school district, the superintendent relies on senior central office staff to implement the details of decisions made as a result of turnaround policy. The research questions are developed from a growing body of literature on the complexity of policy implementation and the impact of cognition and sense-making on policy implementation (Honig, 2006). According to the literature, policy implementers consider a number of factors including people, places, and goals when making sense of educational policy (Honig, 2006, p. 6).

The purpose of this study is to gain insight about how district central office administrators make sense of state turnaround policy and to further assess how their sense making influences policy implementation. The goal is to learn more about what impact their sense making has on turnaround policy implementation, which has implications for central office leaders responsible for school turnaround. Ultimately, this would have more practical and immediate implications for schools and school districts that are currently in the process of turning around chronically failing schools.

For superintendents and school system leaders, system-wide reform may be needed to improve the environment in which struggling schools exist. Improving a system's chronically underperforming schools is the most important in which to engage. A former superintendent and former deputy commissioner of a state education agency (SEA) argues, "For us, a district earns the label of its lowest performing school – clearly sending the message that each district is only as strong as its weakest school" (Kutash et al., 2010, p. 18). This quote refers to the turnaround legislation, which mandates that



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if a school district has one level D (turnaround) school, the district automatically assumes level D status. This sends a clear message that the district is ultimately responsible for improving its chronically underperforming schools. For superintendents of level D school systems, improving the turnaround status becomes an important goal and success measure. Within the state context, superintendents and school committees are being judged, rewarded, or penalized based on their status.

### **Review of Literature**

For the last 40 years scholars, policy makers, and practitioners have grappled with how to improve America's lowest performing schools, particularly its urban schools (Payne, 2010). Within the last decade, the advent of NCLB has brought attention to measuring school effectiveness and has required schools to improve incrementally or face consequences (Ravitch, 2010). Recently, the Obama administration has turned its attention to rescuing the country's 5000 lowest performing schools, which represent 5% of our schools (Bermin & Camins, 2011). The current effort requires districts to use one of four turnaround models in order to qualify for School Improvement Grants (SIG) or Race to the Top (RTTT) funding. While funding requirements come with many stipulations, including use of one of the four-turnaround models, there is a lack of guidance from federal and state agencies in mapping out a blueprint for success for school districts to successfully implement the latest school improvement strategy. What's different this time around is the requirement that schools and districts rapidly "turnaround" schools student achievement data within 2-3 years. As outlined at the beginning of this study, the state legislature passed state turnaround legislation in 2010, which codified state level turnaround policy.

While there are a plethora of online research reports developed by school improvement and social sector organizations that provide insights into the role of school, district, and state actors in turnaround efforts (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah & Tallant, 2010, pp. 25-26; Kowal, Hassel & Hassel, 2009; Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore & Lash, 2007), there is a research gap within peer reviewed

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empirical and theoretical literature addressing the impact of “sense-making” on policy implementation within turnaround schools. Better understanding the impact of sense-making allows LEAs to be more thoughtful nuanced about implementing policy and provides them with an opportunity to take into consideration what might be necessary to ensure successful implementation. As mentioned in our overarching review of the literature, school improvement research, specifically within urban education, serves as the basis for federal and state turnaround policy. For this reason we reviewed this literature for the overall study; and school improvement literature, as it relates to superintendent and central office staff, is also used within this study. This research will help provide context for understanding and analyzing a school system leader’s sense-making of federal and state turnaround policy.

**Central office instructional improvement.** While school turnaround often focuses on individual site based management and improvement, a growing body of literature argues for a more centralized approach to improving chronically underperforming schools. Oftentimes, school district leaders can improve many areas of operations within the school systems to make them work more productively for schools. However, one of the greatest levers for the type of achievement changes sought under Massachusetts turnaround policy requires a focus on instruction by central offices and a self-efficacy belief system amongst central office staff. Marzano & Waters, Hightower, and Coburn, Honig & Stein, as outlined below, make arguments for central office instructional improvement initiatives as a key lever to improve schools and student achievement. If the aforementioned is true, the ways in which central office administrators make sense of policy can be integral to how they implement policy and whether or not they successfully achieve policy goals, which in this case is student achievement.

Robert J. Marzano and Timothy Waters in their book *District Leadership That Works: Striking the Right Balance*, revealed the research from a study using a meta-analysis to prove the essential role of school district leadership in improving student achievement. In the study, Marzano and Waters

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conducted a meta-analysis of “all available studies involving district leadership (or variables related to district leadership) and student academic achievement in the United States from 1970 until 2005” (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 3). The studies revealed “a correlation between district leadership or district leadership variables and student academic achievement.” Looking at fourteen research reports regarding 1210 school districts, the authors found a .24 correlation between student achievement and district leadership with a .5 statistical significance. Accountable for other variables, such as the quality of superintendent leadership, the authors predict that if a superintendent improves their leadership skills by one standard deviation (from 50<sup>th</sup> to 84<sup>th</sup> percentile), student achievement would improve by 9.5 percentile points (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 5). This research makes clear that there is a positive correlation between effective school district leadership and specifically district leadership actions that require any superintendent with turnaround schools within their district to ensure that they are continuously engaging in leadership development as a strategy for improvement of academic outcomes.

In a study conducted of San Diego City Schools (SDCS), the district decided to infuse the entire system with a “boom” of instruction, using its bureaucracy and adult learning as key levers (Hightower, 2002). In addition to focusing on long-term professional development, SDCD Superintendent, Alan Bersin, also reorganized the central office to ensure that additional resources were aligned to serve the instructional units of the organization. For a new superintendent, this meant removing many key central office staff and in many cases dismissing them from the organization. Hightower notes that the district’s effort was based on Elmore and Burney’s (1997) assertion that the central office can be a force for instructional improvement (Hightower, 2002, p. 91). As a result of using the “boom” instructional method, the San Diego City Schools were able to successfully infuse the school system with additional instructional capacity for improved student outcomes on state assessments.

In order to facilitate large-scale change incrementally, central offices need to foster an evidence-based culture to build capacity for progressive and sustainable change (Coburn et. al, p. 21). Coburn,

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Honig, and Stein uncovered this in their research on the use of data/ evidence by district central offices. As encouraged within schools, in order to reach the goal of student achievement, central office leaders can successfully improve student outcomes by ensuring that all decisions that affect the instructional core are evidence-based. This will increase the likelihood of a focus on instruction and an organizational push toward reflective practice and smarter decision-making.

**District capacity to build capacity within schools.** Change theorist and former Dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Michael Fullan, in his book, *Leadership and Sustainability: Systems Thinkers in Action*, calls for an increased district role in schools. He makes an argument for the need for more accountability and responsibility on the part of the school district for school capacity building, although the recent trend within the modern education reform movement has been moving towards decentralization. Fullan states, “We can’t change the system without lateral (cross-school and cross-district) sharing and capacity development. It is very much the district’s role to help make the latter happen” (Fullan, 2005, p. 66). Fullan’s ideas about change within a school system link to that of many scholars within the review of the literature section of the larger study (Zavadsky, 2012 and Leithwood, 1994).

One year later, Fullan, published the timely book, *Turnaround Leadership*, outlining a framework for capacity building at the district level, which includes instituting the “professional learning community model at all levels of the system and beyond the district” (Fullan, 2006, p. 75). Fullan reviews research he’s conducted in many school districts, particularly the York Region District School Board (YRDSB) where the district has successfully implemented system professional learning. He writes:

It is a district with leaders who know the deep meaning of capacity building with a focus on results. School teams participate in continuous professional development to increase their content

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(in this case literacy) expertise and their change knowledge as well as skills such as how to build professional learning communities. There is plenty of “learning in context” ... We deliberately use lateral capacity building to enable schools to learn from each other (Fullan, 2006, p. 75).

The YRDSB example provides a roadmap for district leaders who have the responsibility for developing turnaround schools. The combination of teacher leadership, expertise development, embedded professional development and learning amongst district leaders is key to developing the capacity to build capacity in schools.

The empirical research reviewed above is supported by research reports from practitioners and organizations that support and study school turnaround. Jeff Kutash, Managing Director of Education and Youth Practice at FSG Social Impact Advisors, a non-profit organization specializing in strategic planning, research and evaluation, in their 2010 publication *The School Turnaround Field Guide*, note that “school turnaround requires a coordinated effort between states and local school districts, arguing that they need to move their relationships from being centered on compliance to [working] more effectively as turnaround collaborators” (Kutash et. al., 2010, p. 43). They further add that many states and school districts, at the time of publication, failed to allocate staff and/or departments with the specific charge of school turnaround.

The challenge of capacity building in schools, especially persistently low-performing schools, is not a simple task. Schools and school leaders need intensive support from district leadership teams and central office staff to ensure that teachers have access to the latest research, technology, and distributive leadership opportunities that ensure that capacity can be built in schools with the immediate goal of increasing student achievement and the long-term goal of developing leadership capacity in teachers to sustain student achievement (Vernon-Dotson & Floyd, 2012). As mentioned in the statement of purpose above, this is the primary work of school district central offices and district administrators.

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Understanding the complexities of implementing change, and in the case of this study state mandated turnaround policy implementation, requires an understanding of district leadership sense-making. The goal of this section of the study is to determine the extent to which superintendent and district leader sense-making influences policy implementation. In the context of turnaround as outlined in the state turnaround legislation, district leader sense-making is important because they have 2-3 years to turnaround their level D schools. Therefore, their immediate actions as informed by their thinking may have a great impact on the success of students. As noted by the literature above, this could have great implications for success or failure of turnaround policy implementation and student achievement in Massachusetts' chronically underperforming schools.

Overwhelmingly, a review of the literature on school improvement identifies the need for capacity building in underperforming schools, and furthermore that school district leadership and central office staff has an essential role in the process. As many school districts prepare to meet President Obama's turnaround challenge, officials will find further need to develop capacity within district central offices as they simultaneously build capacity within turnaround schools.

### **Methodology**

The methods section of this component of the study reflects the methods of the larger study. As mentioned in the methodology section of the overall study, we will be using a Single Case Study (Yin, 2009) approach with our unit of analysis being a level D school district within Massachusetts. The research gathered looks at the implementation of turnaround policy research as outlined in the 2010 state legislation. For this section of the study, the goal is to gain insights into the sense-making of individual central office administrators to understand their sense making and policy implementation within their district. The major data collection methods include interviews, document analysis, and a few field observations.

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Our group developed an interview protocol for all stakeholders and this protocol was used for central office staff interviews. Questions that are particularly relevant for this section of the study include: “Who is responsible for communicating turnaround policy to schools/ districts?” and “What steps are needed or will be taken to implement the turnaround policy?” I looked at data across stakeholders to gain insight into the sense-making of the school committee, principals, and teachers on central office’s implementation of turnaround policy. Therefore, all items on the interview protocol were used for analysis within this section of the study. Our unit of analysis is a mid-sized (11,000 students) school system. I therefore sought out key central office administrators responsible for turnaround policy implementation and then secondary staff who might be indirectly responsible for implementation. This included the Superintendent, administrators at the Assistant Superintendent, Chief, and Director levels of the organization. No external partners were interviewed, as there were very few cited by interviewees as meaningfully impacting the turnaround effort.

Turnaround practices and requirements of the SEA lend themselves well to document analysis. The SEA contracts with a non-profit educational improvement organization to conduct site visits that provide formative and summative feedback once per year over the course of the three-year turnaround timeline to determine the extent to which schools and districts have met qualitative benchmarks established by the SEA. The report outlining findings were analyzed using the lens of key areas of inquiry including, politics, culture, policy implementers, context, central office capacity, and superintendent social capital. For additional details on the methodology of this study refer to Chapter 3.

### **Findings**

In conducting interviews of six central office staff within the local education agency (LEA), I gained insight into how the superintendent and central office administrators made sense of the turnaround policy, its mandates, and requirements. The findings below represent the analysis of excerpts from interview transcripts that provide insight into the thinking of central office administrators. After

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understanding their thought process, I noted the impact of their sense making in relation to actions taken. This will address the research questions because it will help me better understand how their understanding of policy goals influenced their actions and the impact their actions had on student achievement. Emergent themes from interviewee responses inform the findings section of the study. The following paragraphs contain findings of this section of the study with the aim of answering the following research questions:

1. How does superintendent sense-making impact implementation of turnaround policy?
2. How does central office staff sense-making impact implementation of turnaround policy?

### **Finding I: Superintendent Leadership Matters**

**Instructional leadership.** The superintendent has aligned professional development and school support structures to support the improvement of teaching and learning throughout the school system. Internally. One interviewee responded, “One thing I think that [she] has done that is unique is her, the relationship, the professional learning community that she has formed with the principals, the central office and the principals.” As this administrator noted, this is a “unique” component of the superintendent’s leadership in the school system that is different from past superintendents. In gathering more information from the LEA, it’s noted that principal meetings take place monthly. The superintendent has intentionally decided to personally attend and in many cases lead these meetings, which demonstrates to leadership at the central office level and the building level what the superintendent values and believes is important. In this case, it’s building a “professional learning community” to develop the instructional leadership capacity of principals and school staff. Another administrator mentioned:

Our principals’ meetings are really central to this. What we certainly notice, any kind of district-wide initiative that we’re trying to get done, we get it done if we train the principals first, and we, the superintendent and I, Dianne Sims, the Director of Special Education, we run the monthly



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principal meetings, but we run them like a workshop, like professional development, but we run them, we plan them, we get the videos. We kind of set the stage for the instructional work that they've got to go back to their buildings, so it's not hands off in the sense.

Here the administrator outlines the type of work being done by central office to prepare for principal meetings, ensuring the success of any district initiative by building the capacity of principals first. It provides insight into their strategy to not only improve their Level D schools, but all schools within their LEA. This focus on instructional leadership begins with what the superintendent believes to be important, their vision and leadership.

In interviewing administrators throughout the central office and reviewing data from principal and teacher interviews, the finding around the superintendent's focus on instructional leadership is underscored by the superintendent's intentional shift of the vision for central office administrators. The superintendent maintained a laser like focus on supporting schools and instruction in classrooms and held central office administrators directly accountable for supporting the same. According to the superintendent:

[The role of] central office is to support the work of principals. That they don't work for us, we work for them. Now at times I always kind of describe central office work as support, guidance and sometimes oversight and we want to be heavy on support. The majority of it needs to be support but there are times when we need to shift into guidance and clearly sometimes a stronger oversight model depending on how our monitoring of the school is going and sort of what we're seeing. And I think that was a shift for our central office is being out in schools, supporting principals to build the professional capacity of their staff. That became the work of central office.

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In this quote, the superintendent reveals the importance of shifting to a service mindset to support the district's schools. While the central office's work is one of monitoring and oversight, the superintendent as the instructional leader is very specific about ensuring that the key function of the central office and its administrators is to support schools. The superintendent outlines a paradigm shift from any pre-existing dominant perception of the role of central office in supporting schools to a new one that makes it clear that schools don't "work for" the central office, but instead the central office "works for" schools. The superintendent's communication to central office administrators outlined their primary work as support and induced a change in thinking for them, ultimately paving the way for a new model of school support as outlined in the second finding of this study; Support, Monitoring, and Accountability.

**Courageous decision-making.** Within this study, I found that courageous decision-making was a key finding in understanding the impact of superintendent sense-making on turnaround policy implementation. After a few years of trying to turnaround under the new state turnaround legislation, the Superintendent made the decision to close school 3 and disperse its students amongst other schools throughout the district. A central office administrator described:

Because of the enrollment at school 3 had been declining because parents had been voting...they had been choosing to send their kids elsewhere. The building I think it originally held like 800 kids and when we closed it - it had 491. So then the decision was made. The superintendent recommended to close it and the school committee approved and we moved on from there.

It was clear that school 3 continued to struggle in spite of interventions to improve student achievement outcomes at the school and district level. Parents were un-enrolling their children from the school and the community began to lose faith in the school. Closing a school is a courageous act for a superintendent because often communities have emotional ties to schools, their legacy, and the teachers

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within them. Many times school board members are against school closure because of the political backlash that could occur. For a superintendent to invest time and energy into a campaign to close a school, it's politically important to "win" to continue to have the faith of the school board, district staff, and the larger community. Moreover, to explain the state education agency's (SEA) leveling process and to make a decision to close a school based on its continuation in level D status for more than 3 years can be a hard sell to parents and the community, especially if there are other schools throughout the school system with a similar profile. In the following quote the superintendent explains that she did not come to this decision lightly, but believed it was the right decision based on the options available.

No, they didn't have the same [resources] but what [school 1] had that [school 2] and [school 3] did not have was that they were an expanded learning time school...But yes, [school 3] had the same sort of resources. That school, I mean I often talk in the community about the school because it was just so heart wrenching to close it and people were upset. But that school went through three superintendents, five principals and a variety of different strategies and it could not turn around. So again, that yes the simple answer is yes. They had the equivalent [resources]. It's just that they could not make effective use of those resources despite different leaders and different strategies. It just never could gain any traction.

As the superintendent described above this was not an easy decision and she continues to address this issue within the community even after the decision has been made. Understanding that through multiple superintendents, principals, and teachers, school 3 was not improving. Not only was this LEA labeled as a "level D" district, which means that it was chronically underperforming and contained at-least one chronically underperforming school, in this case three. The LEA was also under a Recovery Plan and was under close watch by state education department monitors. After three years of trying to turn around school 3, the superintendent understood she had to take a bold action, or face intervention by the state.

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**Social capital.** Many interviewees noted the impact of superintendent leadership during the interviews. On multiple occasions central office administrators reported that the superintendent exhibited strong leadership and has been able to galvanize the community around support for turnaround schools. This support has included the school committee, businesses, and community agencies. The general constituency has also been on board with the superintendent in supporting school turnaround efforts. Administrators explain, “What she does strategically is bring stakeholders on board, [including] community partners [and] teams at the school level.” This demonstrates that the context to successfully achieve school turnaround is provided by the superintendent and she understood her role within turnaround policy implementation to effectively frame the conversation with key stakeholders. When asked generally about the impact of social capital as it relates to turnaround policy implementation throughout the school system, one central office administrator answered:

I think as far as social capital the superintendent has done a nice job forming some very strong connections with the people in the city that have a lot of social capital outside of the district, not the school committee but outside really strong influences, businessmen, Chamber of Commerce. So she’s been able to bring what little social capital there is in the city to advocate for budget at budget time, to advocate for resources and those people end up advocating for her at many points in time.

This quote summarized what many administrators interviewed argued as a key strength of the superintendent that has had an impact on implementing turnaround policy within the district. Here, social capital is defined as outlined within the previous chapter of this study that describes the theoretical framework. As provided by Smylie and Evans (2006), social capital in this context is defined as “social trust,” or the extent to which individuals and the community want to collaborate with the school system based on their confidence in the superintendent’s leadership. Having the support of powerful community allies including members of the business community not only builds community

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confidence in the superintendent as one of the city's largest employers, but also with the ability of the school district to educate and produce a skilled citizenry and workforce. This is important to key stakeholders throughout the city, including politicians and businessmen, as they will one day interact with the LEA's graduates as citizens and employees.

When asked about her sense-making and understanding of the impact of social capital on implementation of turnaround policy the superintendent answered as follows:

I have been doing a lot of thinking about this lately too, because I think we have to really build the social capital within schools and within the community to do this turnaround work because the turnaround work is not just...I mean you can't do it alone. It takes a community to turn around a school.... Because I feel like if we're honest with the community about the good and the bad that we build credibility and they will help us as long as they know what the issues are and how we are trying to address them and how they can be helpful in that regard too. The social piece of it I mean there is a lot of community building. We have got to develop and we have developed relationships with key community members, social organizations, parents, the union ... and again I think the relationships are really key in the turnaround work because it's such intense and complex work that the more people that are in it and understand it I think...And that's what we saw with [school 2].

For the superintendent, the work of turning around chronically underperforming schools involves the entire community. This type of vision and expectation setting requires strong relationships with different types of individuals from everyday citizens to leadership throughout the community. While the superintendent is very much focused on instructional leadership and supporting schools and classroom instruction, she also makes sense of turnaround in terms of the power of relationships to transform a community. Including within the superintendents definition of community are also parents and the

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union, which is a demonstration of her collaborative and open nature. Finally, she mentions school 2 as a school that she can draw a correlation between her ability to galvanize the community around the turnaround effort and the successful turnaround of that school within three years. Within this section of the study a finding is that the superintendent's social capital is a factor successfully implementing turnaround policy.

**Impact of superintendent sense-making.** While there are many factors that impact a superintendent's sense-making of turnaround policy and that influence policy implementation, it's important to analyze key cognitive shifts that unfold throughout the policy implementation cycle. One of those cognitive shift moments for our case study district's superintendent is directly related to supporting instruction. She reveals:

I think [turnaround] is to really focus at the school level. I mean I think we get caught up in central office of when there is policy work or how we're implementing policy. I think we often talk about you have to focus in on this through line between central office down into the individual classroom. It is having that kind of focus rather than...I don't know. I think when we started this work it was like, "All right, what does the district need to be doing?" Well, it's not about what the district needs to be doing. It's about what the school needs to be doing and how does the district create structures and systems to help schools be effective at what they need to do?

The above quote provides insight into the superintendent's thinking and helps to understand the shift in her thinking and the work of the central office. The idea of focusing on the "through line" between central office and classroom instruction is significant for a superintendent, a position probably the most removed from daily classroom instruction.

### **Finding II: Support, Monitoring, and Accountability**

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**Support.** Central office administrators understood their role to be directly responsible for providing support, monitoring school progress towards goals, and providing accountability for improving student performance. Administrators noted that in the past, before the district was labeled as a level D turnaround district, “schools had free reign” and there was a lack of strategic monitoring processes for schools. According to one administrator, “I think it used to be like that. Every school could kind of do what they wanted in this [system].” Administrators’ interpretation and sense-making of the turnaround policy led central office administrators to become more invested in the success of schools, especially turnaround schools. They fear a negative public perception by citizens, who may opt to send their children to other schools. Additionally, because the school system operated under close watch by the state education agency (SEA) under a “recovery plan” prior to its level D designations, many administrators feared that one or more of their schools would be more likely to be taken over by the SEA. These factors in addition to the SEA labeling the system level D provided the superintendent and central office administrators with the understanding that they had to play a key role in influencing school performance. According to one administrator, “We’re just trying to be a little bit more detailed in what we monitor and give feedback on. What we didn’t have, now we’re getting better at this constant feedback loop, whether it’s data, whether it’s evaluation, whether it’s mini-observations.” This administrator and all other central office administrators referenced the recovery plan as their road-map and the district’s improvement plan as the new road map. They note that with the help of state monitors, they successfully implemented the elements of the recovery plan and this has contributed to achievement gains. This demonstrates a cognitive shift for the central office administrators in that they deliberately changed their strategies for how they monitor schools to ensure they met policy goals. In the following paragraphs, I will review some of the key strategies that came as a result of their change in thinking.

To more efficiently support schools, the district central office administrators created a School Review Partner (SRP) process, where they assigned central office administrators to provide support to

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the school system's most struggling turnaround schools, matching the needs of the schools and the expertise of the administrator. A central office administrator noted, "If somebody needs literacy support, I'll put Barbara Turner on there. If somebody needs instructional management support, I'll put somebody else, but the goal is those schools are visited more often, because they're more high priority schools, so we do differentiate support in that way...." This finding gave insight into the thinking of central office administrators as they saw their role as being directly invested in student learning outcomes in their high priority schools and organized their core work around being able to provide support to schools. One central office administrator who is assigned to a school as a SRP noted that she created professional development opportunities for schools and teachers based on the professional development plan created by the principal and teachers within that school. In attempting to further understand the thinking that drove these actions, outside of directives from a superior, an administrator explained that she believed the SRP process was like a tiered approach to addressing the needs of schools: "It's almost like, not much different than being a classroom teacher and looking at your students, but now your students are schools..." In this assessment of the relationship between central office administrators and schools, we are provided with additional supporting evidence that there is cognitive shift taking place that is impacting the work of central office administrators. This line of thinking is further supported by the thoughts of another central office administrator who provided insight into the ingredients that are important to turning around school 3, the school system's newly named level D school:

Robust data systems, clarity of purpose, which is informed hopefully by a superintendent's vision for the district, strong leadership at the building level, systematic approaches to developing action plans [,] and identifying within those action plans any resources that are going to be needed to bring them to life. As I said, that issue of reciprocal accountability where if we expect the school to do this thing and we tell them that we need to provide them with the



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capacity to in fact be successful with that. That might involve training, it might involve money, [and] it might involve time. If we expect the principal or the team or school 4 to turn itself around, we can't just say that and be done with it. We've got to provide them the supports that are going to be necessary to make that happen.

This statement provides additional evidence of a shift in central office administrator's thinking around how to support the work of school turnaround. While a purposeful effort is expected from the principal and teachers within a building, there is also an expectation that central office administrators hold themselves accountable for explicitly and consistently supporting schools in improving student achievement.

In reviewing teacher and principal interview data from this case study, I found that there were a number of stakeholders who corroborated the shift in central office administrator leadership moves. A teacher at school 1, the district's most successful turnaround school, that recently exited level D status to level A status, when asked about what changed to allow the school to be successful, the teacher responded:

The district. We had a strong administration and we have a great group of kids, too. Our area has good kids. So I think when they heard that, when we were chronically underperforming they knew that they had to revamp how we do things here to make it what it could be, what they know it could be. They knew it was going to be a lot of hard work so that meant making sure that the school itself had the support that it needed.

A different teacher was asked a question around whether the school received support from the central office and responded as follows: "Absolutely, and they still do. They still do. I think it's important to hear. Yesterday I was in an ILT meeting in the district at the high school. The superintendent was there, the leader of instruction for math was there. The leader of instruction for ELA was there. We see these

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people all the time.” An assistant principal within the district underscored the visibility and support for central office administrators. She responded, “the district does a good job and our leadership does a good job of talking with us about reform and the status of our district and the status of our schools and not in a demeaning way.” The three quotes above demonstrate the intentionality of central office administrators providing support to schools throughout the district, regardless of whether they were a level D school or not. This support is proving to be key in terms of teacher and building administrator perception of support and self-efficacy in improving student achievement. This finding is also supported by the fact that the state recently “exited” two of the system’s level D schools and also acknowledged that the system met its goals as outlined in the “recovery plan.” Moving forward the district will be guided by the district improvement plan.

**Monitoring.** Central office administrators specifically noted the School Review Partner (SRP) process, whereby each school in the district is now assigned a central office administrator who serves as their SRP and as crucial to providing targeted support and monitoring to schools. As a level D district with high stakes for student achievement and frequent/ close monitoring by the SEA, a robust district monitoring system may prove essential to the improvement of schools. A key central office administrator noted:

“Because I’m counting on [SRPs] to provide constant feedback to the schools, to know the schools well and sometimes I’ll go in with them, and the superintendent will certainly visit the schools, but [SRPs] are that sort of a regular presence and they keep me updated.”

This quote suggests that the district has taken an active role in monitoring the on-going turnaround work in schools since designation by the state. Central office administrators are clear that this work is school based and belongs to principals and school leadership teams, however they organize their work around ensuring that schools meet policy goals and benchmark assessments. Within the SRP process, the school

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principal communicates primarily with the SRP, providing memos, agendas, and often inviting them to key meetings within the school. Teachers are aware of the presence of the SRP and transparency and communication are important to the entire process as principals and teachers struggle publicly with the SRP to develop solutions and action plans to address student learning.

According to a high ranking district leader, schools were supported over the past few years in the creation and development of teacher-made and system vetted common assessments that are used to monitor academic progress periodically throughout the year. The data from these assessments are key in monitoring the progress throughout the year. The administrator explains:

We just finished our first benchmark and I just yesterday gave [the superintendent] the report which looks like this. It's all the benchmarks for the District and she's texting me this morning that we're going to follow up with this, this and this, and so we'll go to that school. One of them is a level D, well, one of them was a level D, and one of them is not. Our first [school to visit] based on the data [we are seeing] we have a conversation, and we'll bring the school review partner into that as well, and we'll look at all the stuff we've been collecting and try to sort of figure it out.

This component of the monitoring system is a collaboration between school leadership and central administration. Another administrator described the monitoring process as follows: “We have to make sure that we have the systems to track the efficacy of our efforts. So if we’re putting interventions into place or we’re putting plans into place or we’re making curricular decisions, we need to ensure that we have ways of tracking and that those are in fact having the intended outcomes.” This quote demonstrates that as the district continues to improve, it is reviewing its processes and systems to determine what other systems need to be built and what other programs need to be monitored. Essential to the success of a collaborative monitoring between building leadership and central office leadership is ensuring a

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level of transparency that is appropriate, to allow all parties to feel safe about buying-in to the process.

The following quote by a central office administrator captures this idea:

What we didn't have when I was a literacy coach, I don't ever remember us having a partner, so now we have a school review partner, and so the school review partner, we monitor [the principal's data]... I shouldn't say monitor because it's not like that. The principals would hate you. You're constantly reading the memos, because they send it to you. You're reading their agendas, the [common planning time] agendas and so you know the teachers in the building are aware that you are that school's school review partner, because it's transparent, right? I think that communication helps tremendously.

In reviewing this finding, support to schools is only usual if on-going monitoring tracks, as one administrator says, “the efficacy of our efforts.” At the highest levels of the organization, including the superintendent, data is being reviewed and acted upon when it doesn't meet expectations that appear to be on track. Various central office administrators were cited as identifying their monitoring systems as a key component of their sense-making and therefore of their implementation of turnaround policy.

**Accountability.** Accountability is also a major finding, as it recurred throughout excerpts of interviews we analyzed. Interviewees reported that central office developed its own accountability and performance system. Initially, central office administrators prioritized the district's schools using a red/ yellow/ green system to prioritize schools by performance data to determine the level of support needed. This process also entailed having conversations around school data between central office administrators and school leadership teams. They identified strengths and weaknesses and developed joint priorities to focus their short-term and long-term actions. In the quote below, a central office administrator describes the new level of accountability and transparency during a school data review session:

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For the next two months, all my memos, your feedback, your walkthrough data, it should really be around this, right? We didn't do that before. We had a data system. We certainly have worked more on putting benchmarks in place, but there wasn't accountability at the school level. So now that we do this, the other thing we'll do is this has everything, our data is transparent among schools, so we share, not just your data, but everybody's data. It's out there.

This quote supports the idea of a shift in the LEA and for central office administrators. They employed a targeted and focused approach to data analysis and action planning to provide for clarity of direction to and follow-up by school leadership. This is crucial to implementation of the turnaround policy because there are clear expectations from the central office that there will be thorough follow-up on the part of school leadership.

Additionally, administrators reported that if central office staff, principals, or teachers are not performing and not meeting district expectations, the superintendent will remove and replace them. One administrator reported, "It's really a team process that happens, but she is a strong superintendent in the sense that if there are people in those buildings who aren't able to do the work or ready for the work, she'll remove them; she has no problem with that." This is a key leadership factor that three central office administrators identified in district support to schools. Accountability started at the top with the superintendent and trickled down throughout the organization. Monitoring and accountability systems in the district are led by the superintendent, which sends the message that student achievement is important. One central office administrator reported:

I think because we are so focused and targeted, that unlike before, if people were doing their own thing, they sort of flew under the radar, because [they] wouldn't be so noticed, . . . but now it's being addressed. When we look at that data, those schools in the red, those are the schools that are going to get called in by the superintendent. Those are the schools that [Sally] is going to say

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‘Let me see all of your school review reports. Let’s have a discussion with the principal. What’s going on?...because we’re seeing the data is low in ELA...’I think it is so open now that if you wanted to do your own thing that didn’t go along with the district, then you will most likely be at another district, because this is where we’re going.”

The above quote provides a rich description of the expectations, specifically the intersection between monitoring and accountability. Assessment data is used to measure student skills and if the data trends negatively, the school review partner is addressed by the Assistant Superintendent and Superintendent, who may also bring the school principal into the conversation. Moreover, while schools are provided with support to help them improve, the administrator acknowledged that in the past there might have been principals, teachers, or central office administrators who did not buy into the vision established by the superintendent for the district. If educators in the district are not aligned with the vision, they are directly or indirectly asked to leave their position or the district.

Central office administrators self-identify their role as one of “support, monitoring, and holding [schools] accountable and providing feedback.” Administrators described the ultimate brunt of accountability coming down on them from school committee members if the data is not where it should be. Consequently, central office administrators find it important to give feedback to ensure that schools continuously improve before the stakes are high on state assessments. State assessments being one of the key measures that will determine whether or not a school and district exits level D status, the district has aligned benchmark assessments and feedback cycles around the state assessment to ensure schools are on track to prepare students for success. As described by one central office administrator:

We actually begin every year, every school gets a data think tank session and we’ll review the MCAS data and the goal is I will have the school analyze the data and then I’ll have analyzed the data, and then we’ll come to, a ‘come to Jesus’ kind of meeting and say, “What are you looking

at? What did you notice? I'll tell you if I noticed the same thing." But the purpose is for the schools to set short-term high priority goals, so this is what I really need to work on.

As the administrator above described, the district has established structures and routines across the district's schools that promote accountability for student achievement and school performance. Central office administrators led this effort on behalf of the superintendent and this work is continuous throughout the school year. Central office administrators organize their work around supporting, monitoring, and holding schools accountable for student achievement.

### **Finding III: Distribution of financial resources and human capital management**

**Distribution of financial resources.** When discussing what it takes to turnaround a school and all of the district's chronically underperforming schools, central office administrators in multiple interviews stressed that school turnaround was building level work. Additionally, they saw principal leadership as the primary ingredient to school turnaround. It was clear that their sense-making around how to, and why schools improved, was the result of the actions of a strong school leader. When asked about why school 3 was not successful at making rapid dramatic change, central office leaders cited turn over in principal leadership as the primary reason. Moreover, central office administrators understood principal leadership to be essential to successful turnaround efforts in school 1 and 2, in comparison to school 3. In response to a question about whether or not all turnaround schools had the same access to resources the superintendent responded as follows:

No, they didn't have the same [resources] but what school 1 had that school 2 and school 3 did not have was that they were an expanded learning time school...But yes, school 3 had the same sort of resources. That school, I mean I often talk in the community about the school because it was just so heart wrenching to close it and people were upset. But that school went through three superintendents, five principals and a variety of different strategies and it could not turn

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around. So again, the simple answer is yes. They had the equivalent [resources]. It's just that they could not make effective use of those resources despite different leaders and different strategies. It just never could gain any traction.

What the superintendent describes encompasses a combination of building leadership and resource utilization. Her assessment was that the only resource that all three schools did not have in common was the Extended Learning Time (ELT) grant. Outside of the grant, the impression of the superintendent was that the schools were provided "equivalent" resources. When the question of equal distribution of resources was posed to another central office administrator, he responded:

A lot of resources have been put in those schools. I mean, we put a lot of resources in [school 3] too, it just didn't work, for a variety of reasons, but like extending the time. One of the huge initiatives in the District, which we want all [level D] schools, actually we only have one, [school 4], just got designated, but as many as possible, with the extended learning time, so we did pay for that.

This quote supports the superintendent's quote above that additional resources were also provided for schools 2 and 3, specifically in the area of extended learning time. It is not clear to what extent and whether or not this was equal. While the ELT grant provided potentially a minor difference between access to resources at various schools; the superintendent, teachers and principals who were interviewed voiced a different perspective. A teacher at a turnaround school within the district provided the following assessment of salary differences amongst district schools.

Initially the principal wanted us to work for free for an hour and a half every day. Free. When right up the street at [another] school to work two hours extra a day they were getting \$18,000 a year and [school 1] as well. They have an ELT grant. They're getting like between, if you're a



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younger teacher you're getting like \$12,000 and if you're a veteran teacher probably getting like \$18,000. So I was going to work for free but my colleagues are getting, you know what?

The above teacher described the differences in teacher compensation across schools for working an additional 90 minutes daily. This aligns with the superintendent's statements around the ELT grant providing additional resources to school 1 unlike schools 2 and 3. The disparity in resources appears vast as we learn more about the amount of financial resources provided to school 1 to sustain its improved student achievement.

A school board member interviewed provided a different perspective on resource allocation to turnaround schools within the school system:

There's been a lot, the school that has received the greatest amount of money for [turnaround] is [school 1]. They've received a lot of money for this...Now, I'm glad they went from a level [D] to a level [B]. However, their level [B] is just slightly above the minimum. I wish I had brought my data because of the fact that the overall scores that schools have is from 1 to 99. And, 20, below 20 you're a level [C], above 20 you're a level [B], of which case, and that's a percentile of all of the schools of similar size and whatnot in the state. Well, fine [school 2], I think is something like 26. So, yes, it's a level [B] school. Congratulations, I agree. A lot of money was put in to achieve this.

The school board member explains that school 2 was expected to improve due to the many resources allocated to the school. In-fact, she went so far as to say that school 2 received the greatest amount of financial resources from the district. This demonstrates the lack of consistency in terms of the message throughout the school system about which schools were allocated what amount of funds and for what purposes. A principal within the district provided comments along these lines in addressing resource allocation. She explains, "there's not a formula out in the district that says oh if you have 800 kids these

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are the supports you get. If you have 600 kids these are the supports you get. That's a struggle for me because I came from a system that was very structured like that so that it was equitable in terms of supports." This principal suggested the creation of a resource allocation model to provide a district policy that's transparent to ensure equitable resource distribution.

The school board as a whole is charged with the task of hiring and evaluating the superintendent, creating and approving district policy and providing schools with resources by approving the budget. In interviews of school board members, they also provided some ambivalence around resource allocation and raised concerns around not having enough resources.

What are we going to do with that one? [School 4], on the scale of 1 to 99, it's a [level B], no I'm sorry it's a [D]. I mean you can't get much lower than that. It's a one, right? The [school], another elementary school, a brand new building, with all the bells and whistles that it needs, they're a [level B]. The [school], which is in my neighborhood, another new school, a [level B]. These schools need an influx of funds. Now, there's only so much money available of which case the amount of money that is being expended for wrap-around services in there, although if indeed we had endless amount of money, that would be fantastic, but we don't. Now, where do we get the biggest bang for the buck? In my opinion, that money is coming from Race to the Top funds, of which case I would rather see that money being used to have more teachers in the classroom, to have those classrooms, even though you might have 25 kids in the early grades in there, but it's still difficult to get the 25 students.

Here the school board member questions how to address the challenges at it's most recently designated turnaround school, school 4. Additionally he questions whether or not the "wrap-around zones" that were funded at schools 1 and 2, were the best use of funds to address the needs of the school in order to

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improve student performance. He raises the question about whether not wrap-around zone funding might be better spent on providing additional teachers within each school.

In reviewing the data collected, it's clear that there are concerns across the implementer groups within the larger study with resource allocation to support school turnaround. While the superintendent and central office administrators may be more clear about how district priorities are funded and prioritized. Principals, teachers, and school board members have various takes on how these decisions are made and some requested the creation of equitable systems of resource distribution and/ or the realignment of resources based on the needs of various schools throughout the school system.

**Human capital management.** Human capital management was another area of finding that was impacted by superintendent and central office administrator sense-making of state turnaround policy. The context for the LEA is important in this finding, because the school system did not have a human resources chief prior to the 2013-2014 school year. The superintendent therefore exercised authority over and carried-out many of the human resource functions. While this structure may not have been an intentional move to support the implementation of turnaround policy, it allowed the superintendent to be intimately involved with the provisioning and development of human resources.

A part of the superintendent's human resources strategy was to give building principals hiring and staffing authority. Principals were given autonomy for the most part with choosing and opting out of teachers who they believed were not working toward the school goals and supporting the initiatives. The principal of school 1 noted:

A huge thing, and it was a huge bad thing in [another LEA], OK? Was that [the superintendent] said that no one could bump into the level [D] schools. OK? And that was particularly good because as [school 1] developed the extended learning time, the teachers made more money. And so people that weren't any good wanted to come in. And she gave me the power to say no.

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As the principal described, she was given the ability to choose who taught in her school. If there were lay-offs or level D excising from other turnaround schools within the system, she could choose who was assigned to the building instead of hiring to follow the seniority system created by the local collective bargaining unit. This proved helpful in ensuring that quality teachers were in the most needy schools. A teacher at [school 1] interviewed also appreciated this practice:

I know the funding aspect of things and providing resources in terms of professional development. I think giving our administration the latitude to hire and fire was key. It might not be a popular opinion but I think that was important. I really do because otherwise there were teachers that shouldn't have been here and probably shouldn't have been teaching to begin with. They went off to other schools in the district. It just got too difficult for them. I make it sound like [the principal] was, she was a hard taskmaster but she was warm and fuzzy underneath all of that. You just didn't see it unless you needed to see it, I guess.

The teacher admits that providing principals with the latitude to hire and fire, although most would not agree with him, was one of the best tools provided to principals to rapidly improve academic outcomes. At the school 4, the new Human Resources director assisted the superintendent with implanting the process. A teacher below describes:

So basically the way that they're handling it, because it was done during like the school year had already started, we had already had classes and stuff, they're allowing teachers to opt out. So if the teacher opts out, they will be placed somewhere else in the district. The day that we found out that we could opt out or that half of us were going to be fired, or all of us were going to be fired, immediately the tone changed. It was negative. Everybody, a lot of the older teachers that had been here for a long time were talking about well maybe I should opt out, and immediately they were checked out, and I don't think they ever came back.

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The teacher above describes the method by which teachers were informed of potential involuntary transfer from level D turnaround schools. It also appeared to have a negative effect on staff morale during the middle of the school year. The superintendent described the same process as it took place in school 2. She notes:

Well this was the principal was very strategic and this was at [school 2]. I loved the way she did this and we have replicated since that time. So when [school 2] was first declared as a [level D] school she pulled her staff together and said, “What do you think is necessary from staff in order to turn around a [level D] school? Let’s put up the characteristics of a staff and the characteristics of an individual teacher that would work in a [level D] school in a way that would turn it around again rapidly.” So they did that in a faculty meeting and so she had this chart paper of okay here are the characteristics. It is really defined. You have got to give it all you’ve got...So then she met with each individual teacher with that chart paper hanging up in her office and said, “Is that you?”...So some teacher said, “No, that is not me. So those teachers felt selected out because they realized...And then some other teachers she had to really kind of counsel through, “Are you...? “Oh yes, that is me.” So really let’s take a look at this. Is this really you? And it was a couple of meetings. So she was able to effectively transition 50% of her staff out through that process who ultimately fell selected out. And I just thought that was a really...Because there were no hard feelings in that. It was sort of a self-discovery process for teachers that no, this isn’t...I am not going to be able to do this work. It didn’t mean they were ineffective or bad teachers. There is just something we have found very unique about a teacher, the skill set of a teacher that works in a level [D] school.

As the superintendent explained this was a more effective way of notifying teachers of the involuntary transfer procedures because it allowed teachers to engage in self-reflection about their own readiness for turnaround work. This is a practice that could be made uniform across schools, as it would provide

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principals with an effective strategy to allow teachers to feel as if they are apart of the process and less like turnaround is something that is happening to them.

Financial and human resources allocation and management are integral to turnaround policy implementation and superintendent and central office administrator understanding of resource allocation and management impacts how they implement turnaround policy. The findings including concerns raised by multiple implementers around use of financial resources to support and sustain school turnaround and managing human resources to ensure effectiveness throughout the organization.

### **Discussion**

**Impact of sense-making on policy implementation.** Weick (1995) describes sense-making as “how (individuals) construct what they construct, why and with what effects” (p. 4). The research questions within study sought out to answer how superintendent and central office administrator sense-making impacted turnaround policy implementation. More specifically, Spillane et al. (2006) discusses that sense-making and cognition requires individuals to understand a policy and then alter their practice as a result. They further argue that learning new ideas using old schemas can hinder policy goal attainment. Therefore in understanding the impact of sense-making on turnaround policy implementation within this case study, the discussion section will seek to provide more context around implementer actions and outcomes and furthermore provide implications for successful turnaround policy implementation within other contexts.

**superintendent leadership/ instructional leadership.** State turnaround legislation provides the superintendent with key actions that must take place on a timeline throughout the implementation process. While these are more technical guidelines, it does provide that the chief officer of the SEA has the right to reject the superintendent’s plan for the turnaround schools and return it to the superintendent for further consideration. Inherent within the policy is the

understanding that while this may be school level work, the superintendent is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the policy is implemented well and meets policy goals through executing the turnaround plan submitted to the SEA. Instructional leadership, courageous decision-making, and social capital were the three major areas of finding within the realm of superintendent leadership. For instructional leadership, the findings revealing of the various ways the superintendent served as an instructional leader helped set the context for a results driven culture focused on student achievement. Within schools 1 and 2, this had an impact on the focus exhibited by and support perceived by the principals. Based on her own prior knowledge and back ground in the same school system, the superintendent understands what was needed to move turnaround work forward. Consistent with Spillane et al. (2006), the superintendent combined her existing knowledge with the understanding of policy expectations. If what Spillane et. al. (2006) argues holds, that understanding of the policy hinges on whether not implementers alter their practice as a result of implementing the policy, it could be argued that this superintendent understood the policy. One of those shifts in practice is her message to central office administrators that central office exists to serve schools. This was a change in thinking that led to a support and monitoring model as described in findings section II above.

**courageous decision-making.** While this finding did not have as much data support as others, the severity of the action to close a school taken by the superintendent deserves attention since it's not often the route chosen by superintendents who are implementing this policy throughout the nation. School closure can be politically messy and difficult for all citizens within a community, however the superintendent also understood the real threat of having the SEA take over a school and the negative perception that could come along with having to take on a managing partner. For a superintendent who spent at least ten years in the district previous to being named superintendent, courageous decision-making, or making potentially politically

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contentious decisions like school closings or removal of ineffective principals and teachers could be difficult leadership moves. In some ways, making a courageous decision is making a political decision in the best interest of students. Malen (2006) points out that in some instances the influence of politics on policy implementer sense-making can alter the methods taken by the implementer and result in policy dilution. While dilution may be difficult, it could “erode social reform.” Malen adds,

Even at the local level, deeply rooted traditions of incremental decision making and broadly held views about occupational survival may prompt district officials to select and enact policies that “attract...notice” and enhance legitimacy, but do not alter fundamentally, the orientations and operations of the school system (Malen, 2006, p. 97).

Application of Malen’s theory to the decision of the superintendent to close a turnaround school as a strategy to address chronic underperformance could be viewed as “occupational survival.” While the federal regulation and state regulation does allow the superintendent to make this choice, it could be argued that school closure is not transformative and is not sustainable or replicable. While the superintendent may have met policy goals by decreasing the impact of underperforming schools by SEA standards, it could be argued by some that this action did not fundamentally alter the overall system. The teachers and students were simply moved to other schools. On the contrary, it could also be argued that the schools that teachers and students were moved to are no longer turnaround schools and therefore can provide a better education for the students as well as a better professional learning environment for teachers. In a recent news article, I learned that the school that was closed at the end of the 2012-2013 school year (school 3) will be re-opening under the same name in the fall of 2014- 2015. While it’s too early to determine what the population and make-up of the school will look like, the SEA has decided that it will not be leveled using the SEA accountability system because of the absence of data the



year it closed. Again, I note that the act of closing the school itself serves as evidence that the superintendent is willing to alter practice and make bold decisions in order to do what has not been done before to reach policy goals.

**social capital.** Another area of significance to be noted is the superintendent's social capital and ability to bring key stakeholders on-board in the process of getting the school system and greater community to think differently about turnaround schools. Multiple central office administrators interviewed noted the respect the superintendent has amongst the community and how she has tried to leverage her social capital at various points, including during the closing of school 3. A December 2013 article recognized the superintendent as "Person of the Year," within the local town and specifically recognized the courageous decision that she had to make in closing chronically underperforming school 3. As mentioned in the findings section within this chapter, as well as in the theoretical framework of previous chapters, an important component of social capital is social trust, which in this context is the extent to which school system staff and community organizations want to collaborate with the superintendent to achieve policy goals. The continued partnerships and the recent "Person of the Year" article serve as soft evidence that the superintendent still remains popular amongst key community stakeholders, which is essential for continuing to reach policy goals.

**support for schools.** Practice was again altered, in keeping with the definition of sense-making provided by Spillane et al. (2006), when the superintendent and central office administrators created and implemented a system for providing support to schools. Findings data from teachers, principals, and central office administrators demonstrated that there were a number of areas that improved as result of turnaround policy implementation. Curriculum development, benchmark assessments, and data analysis support were amongst some of the key areas identified by implementers of areas of support provided by central office.

**monitoring schools.** The school review partner process was probably one of the most explicit examples of central office administrators altering practice to implement turnaround policy. As one administrator described the ineffectiveness of all administrators visiting each individual school together, now they have adopted a more targeted approach as School Review Partners (SRP). They also noted the creation of data review sessions to identify weakness areas, allowing them to problem solve with central office administrators and school leadership all within the same room. The sense-making theoretical lens that applies to this finding is identified by Datnow (2006) as “co-construction,” allowing implementer interactions to influence one another over time and co-construct” meaning of the policy. The periodic data review sessions and having SRPs review meeting minutes, memos, benchmark data and other information with school leadership helps facilitate the co-construction process not only for school based staff, but also for the central office administrators involved.

**accountability for schools.** The superintendent holds central office administrators, principals, and teachers accountable through rating schools using the red/ yellow/ green system, continuously analyzing data and having difficult conversations when needed. Again, Datnow’s (2006) co-construction theory factors into how implementers make sense of turnaround policy, as the superintendent and central office administrators hold them accountable.

**financial resource allocation and human resource management.** For financial and human resource allocation and management, respectively, the major concerns from the findings were around transparency of the resource allocation and decision making processes. School committee members and teachers specifically expressed a lack of clarity around how decisions were made to resource some schools more so than others, and the ways in which staff would be removed or involuntarily transferred from schools. This relates to Malen (2006) and the political frame of sense-making and policy implementation in that there are decisions that have broad ramifications

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and impact on the lives of individuals. Since resource allocation, like politics, often come from belief systems, are “value-laden,” and impact the livelihood of implementers, the superintendent and central office administrators may find it difficult to be completely transparent.

**Contribution to theoretical knowledge.** This set of findings will contribute to the theoretical frame by providing insight into the ways in which politics and other factors contribute to superintendent and central office sense-making as they attempt to implement policy. An analyses of the preliminary qualitative data and findings demonstrates that the political ramifications and perception of the community, school committee, and DESE all impacted the way in which central office administrators made sense of implementing turnaround policy. Malen (2006) draws on Bardach’s (1977) framework that presents the idea of “political games” as a metaphor for how stakeholders interact to achieve policy goals within the political arena.

In my analysis of the findings, it does appear that sense-making is impacted by a number of factors and that it influences how policy is implemented. The findings demonstrate a link to the theoretical research on the impact of politics on sense-making in policy implementation. Interviewees noted that the threat and fear of SEA takeover of their schools and system in being named level F was a major impetus to ensuring dramatic interventions and in some cases rapid improvement in the system’s chronically underperforming schools. There are three schools that were level D turnaround schools from 2010-2013, referred to here within as schools 1, 2, and 3. While school 1 was labeled chronically underperforming in 2003, school 2 was labeled in 2010 when the state legislation was enacted. School 1 began to continuously improve, while school 3 showed no improvement and was plagued by inconsistent leadership. Each year school 3 did not meet its annual student achievement goals on state assessments in English Language Arts and Math. School 2 improved within the three-year timeframe prescribed by the policy. The fear of having the school and/or district labeled as level F with direct state intervention was enough to compel the superintendent and central leadership to close school 3. Central

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office administrators reported, “Of course we ultimately do not want any of our schools to be managed by a [educational management organization] or the SEA, and we ran out of time, so the superintendent decided to close the school.” This demonstrates that dramatic action was taken based on the aggressive timeline and the threat of state takeover or level F status. The enduring understandings are that there is a link between sense-making and understanding of the turnaround policy and successful policy implementation. Successful policy implementation is defined as meeting policy goals. If this is true, it becomes important for future studies to consider what implementation models might be appropriate to test to create a body of research in this area.

**Contribution to practical knowledge.** Overall this study will provide superintendents and district administrators with an understanding of the importance of sense-making on implementing new policies. This study will argue that being aware of all of the factors that influence sense-making in high stakes situations is crucial to overall success, as the case study LEA was intentional in some key ways that contributed to their success. Additionally, this study will provide district administrators with strategies that have proven successful in a school district that struggles with many challenges faced by urban school districts and other “gateway” cities that serve recent immigrant populations. The School Review Partner process is one best practice for superintendent and central office administrators if they are looking to implement policy on turnaround or other areas where they will be responsible for schools accomplishing dramatic and rapid gains in a short time period. Finally, the study confirmed what research says around central office leadership moves and it’s potential impact on improving outcomes for students. What’s unique about this particular case was the leadership and willingness of the superintendent to not just remove ineffective leaders at the school and central office level, but to remove them from the district all together.

**Limitations.** The limitations of the study include time available for research, central office administrator sample size, and lack of access to follow-up interviews and research. In searching for the

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LEA to research, there was a one to two month delay in being able to locate the appropriate school system in which to conduct this study in addition to getting the LEA respond in a timely manner. From the time we had our initial meeting with the superintendent to the point of receiving the letter of commitment from the district took a month. Additionally, waiting for approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) added time to the process. After IRB approval, the LEA it took a few weeks to schedule the interviews and complete them. These obstacles add to the limitations by shortening the research window and curtailing the length of time needed for collecting more data.

The LEA had eight viable central office administrators that were appropriate to interview based on their position and assignments. Only six responded and there was not a major push from the superintendent to require administrators to interview. With the scarcity of time, this also made it difficult to have more data to collect for analysis. To compensate for have a sample size of six, this study draws on the interview data collected within the larger study, including teacher, school administrator, and school committee member interviews. Moreover, there was little follow-up from the superintendent or central office administrators when asked for additional interviews or documents for analysis and data triangulation. These areas provided in the research collection and analysis process and therefore serve as limitations to the study.

### **Recommendations**

**Superintendent leadership.** Superintendent leadership is essential to the turnaround policy implementation process. It is recommended that the superintendent engage in dialogues with teachers to build social capital amongst this group of stakeholders, as it appeared to be an underutilized stakeholder group. Additionally, this will help with changing the perception of there being a lack of transparency by the central office. This transparency and trust building process can begin at the top of the organization between the superintendent and the school committee, as multiple qualitative data points revealed this an area where there are pockets of distrust (specifically as it relates to transparency and resource utilization).

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This can be accomplished through frequent Board of Education retreats and a public strategic planning process that culminates in a systemic strategic plan that goes beyond the LEA's current School System Improvement Plan. This would allow for continued implementation of turnaround policy, but could also began to shift the conversation from the LEA being a "chronically under-performing district," to a district with a clear vision and plan of execution to provide students with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

**Support, monitoring, and accountability.** The LEA is encouraged to ensure that clear communication channels are established between central office administrators, teachers and principals regarding the purpose and procedures behind the School Review Partner (SRP) process. While the current SRP process is helpful, some teachers were unaware of it and it was not clear that principals fully understood it to be connected to monitoring and accountability. Additionally, it also may be possible to make meaningful connections between the SRP process and other monitoring systems throughout the district including principal evaluation or school improvement planning. The support, monitoring, and accountability systems can also be placed on a digital dashboard and be made available to principals so that they can have ready access to the same data that central office has to make informed real-time decisions.

**Financial and human resources.** It's recommended that the LEA provide clear and transparent communication around resource allocation and human resource management practices/ strategies. The LEA is encouraged to provide all school system and community stakeholders with a clear picture of resource allocation to schools, especially chronically underperforming schools. While this may add amore political layers onto to the work of leading schools, it could also promote trust amongst stakeholders, central administrators and the superintendent, ultimately providing greater transparency and implementer understanding of the LEAs turnaround strategy.

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It is also recommended that the LEA develop a model for equitable resource distribution across schools to be re-assessed annually based on the change in school population, demographics, and programming by building. This is specifically recommended regarding assignment of full time teaching positions, grant funding, additional financial commitments that translate into and impact resources available to schools to improve student achievement outcomes. This would result in a more transparent process that is known by stakeholders in advance of resource allocation.

### **Chapter Five: Discussion<sup>5</sup>**

Our study looked at sense-making of policy implementation from the perspective of four different implementer groups in a single LEA's chronically underperforming schools. Sense-making involves the understanding and interpretation of policies and their intended meanings and it can influence the success or failure of reform initiatives (Honig, 2006). We wanted to understand the role sense-making played in what the implementers actually did and what they thought was effective as a result. Each of the four implementer groups (School Board, superintendent/central office, school leadership, and teachers) identified the goal of turnaround as sustainable improvement in the LEA's chronically underperforming schools. Each of the four researchers in this study examined a different group of implementers and produced individual findings for the group studied. By looking across our findings from the different levels of implementation within the same local education agency (LEA) we were able to come up with important recommendations about communication, the importance of data, and the use of resources to support turnaround.

In this chapter, we present the following three broad recommendations to help the LEA reach its stated goal of sustainable improvement from its turnaround policy implementation. First, there needs to be a focus on improved communication between implementers. By researching four different implementation levels we were able to identify areas where increased communication could aid this process. Our second recommendation involves the need for the LEA to specify a process for resource allocation. The implementers we studied experienced frustration over what they perceived as inconsistencies in how resources were distributed across the LEA. Building a consistent and transparent system of resource allocation would increase trust and effectiveness. Our third recommendation involves developing the capacity of implementers to work with data. Over and over again our findings pointed to

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<sup>5</sup> This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Jamie Chisum, Anna Cross, and Jill Geiser.



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the value of data to communicate progress of the school and to inform instruction in the classroom, however the capacity to understand and work with this valuable tool was inconsistent across implementers. An increased focus on professional development for all levels of implementers in the area of data use would aid the process of turning around the failing schools of the LEA.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Recommendation One: Communication Between Implementers**

Communication is a broad term that encompasses many important findings from our individual studies. Because increased communication helps to facilitate sense-making (Datnow, 2006; Honig, 2006), we looked at how facilitating communication between all parties increased their capacity to make sense of what they were being asked to do. We also examined the importance of adaptive communication to promote sense-making (Heifitz, Grashaw, Linskey, 2009). Adaptive communication leads to adaptive behaviors and centers more on implementer beliefs and behaviors rather than merely on the technical requirements of the policy. Finally, the four of us identified some specific areas where communication can be strengthened.

A finding in each of our four studies involved the need for the turnaround policy to be communicated on a continual basis throughout the implementer chain from the school board, superintendent, school leaders, on to teachers and back again. Some of this communication involved the requirements of the plan and what it meant for a school to be named as chronically underperforming. There were simply things that had to be done for compliance and the superintendent needed to disseminate that information up to the school board and then down to principals and teachers. We found traditional structures such as school board and principal meetings and staff meetings in local schools were in place where this communication might happen. In the early part of the turnaround implementation this took on a very directive flavor. Teachers and principals who feared for their jobs

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were not in a position to debate the merits of the turnaround plan. Their perceived job at the introduction of this crisis of designation was to hear the directive communication from their bosses and to perform the task they were being told to do. This was also true in the case of the superintendent's communication of the plan to the school board, even though the board was clearly tasked with hiring and firing the superintendent. According to the turnaround legislation, the superintendent of the education agency is the person responsible for writing and communicating the plans to everyone else in the system. Oddly enough, the superintendent's communication to the school board in this LEA was also directive.

Members of the committee understood their role in the turnaround process to be merely doing what the state and the superintendent told them they needed to do. This was clearly efficient in the early stages of the process. With the need for local education agencies to complete their turnaround in under three years, the pressure to begin the action phase of any plan is immense and pushes leaders to spend less time discussing and more time trying to make gains in student achievement. Directive communication appears to be the most effective way to enter the process quickly.

Our research suggested that the communication became more complicated during the next steps of the implementation process. Once the plan for turnaround was communicated, different implementers confronted the realities of putting that plan into action. Inevitably more communication became necessary. For example, the school board needed to reach out to the community and begin communicating with people about how they were responding to the new designation. The superintendent needed to hand off the work of implementation to the members of the central staff and the building principal in order to be able to attend to all her other tasks. Finally, building principals needed to enable teachers to change the work they had been doing in order to improve student results. In the action phase of implementation, communication needed to be multi-directional and sense made by each implementer (Datnow, 2006; Honig, 2006). Community members wanted their questions answered and their concerns heard. Principals needed access to resources from central office to train staff or purchase materials

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necessary to follow the plan. Teachers needed to be engaged in what Datnow calls "co-construction" as they discussed with each other their interpretation of the turnaround process.

The difference between the type of communication needed for an understanding of the turnaround designation and the communication necessary for an effective implementation of the plan are essentially the difference between technical and adaptive communication (Heifitz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009).

Heifitz et al. (2009) define adaptive leadership as, "the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive." ( p. 2). Our studies found that technical communication between and among the implementers had already been accomplished. The LEA knew it was designated as chronically underperforming. From the school board to the teachers, implementers understood the need for raising test scores. Principals and central office staff helped to communicate the formal process of how teachers might opt out of working in a turnaround school. Staff at all levels had a functional understanding of what the turnaround designation meant and what the school needed to do in order to be successful.

However, from our research we identified two areas of need involving adaptive communication. The first was the need to establish the new beliefs and culture of turnaround. The second was to answer two essential questions for the individual implementer engaged in turnaround work: 1) What is my role in turnaround?; and 2) What are the expectations of that role?

During the beginning phase of turnaround the superintendent and building leadership drafted plans that became the shared vision of the work. This phase relied much more on the dissemination of information rather than discussion between implementers. The second phase of implementation relied more heavily on ideas involving co-construction, where implementers made sense of their role by talking to people in similar roles (Datnow, 2006). They came to a new understanding of their role in the turnaround process by contextualizing and interpreting directives by the superintendent or the building leadership through their own experience and prior knowledge (Spillane et al., 2006). When success was

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achieved in different places in the LEA, we found that implementers next needed to create a culture with norms that internalized the wisdom of this newly formed knowledge. Communication at this stage became far more complicated because the people who were involved in the work of turnaround were now more knowledgeable. School Board members saw what worked and what didn't and began to question where efficiencies could be found. Central office personnel began to understand patterns in data and behaviors as a result of their work. Principals spoke about removing themselves to the background as teachers began to lead improvement initiatives without being asked.

From these findings the research team has derived three ways we believe communication can be strengthened in this LEA to improve the turnaround process and its sustainability. Our recommendations focus on using existing structures and developing better communication processes that can take place within them. The first recommendation is the use of the building principal meetings with central office staff to develop a common language around what it means to turn around underperforming schools and to help schools change before they are designated as underperforming. The second has to do with use of the broad representation of implementers present in the original local stakeholders group to provide an ongoing planning board throughout implementation phases. A third way communication can be strengthened is through an effort to ensure the school board understands the work of turnaround and their specific role in it.

Within the local education agency we studied, since 2009 there have been four schools designated as chronically underperforming. Two of these schools have successfully exited and become a level A and level B school respectively. A third school was closed by the LEA rather than be allowed to fall to level F status, and a fourth school was newly designated as chronically underperforming in the fall prior to the beginning of our study. There are lessons to be learned from all of these cases. Both successful schools have stories to tell about what made a difference in their turn around efforts.

Principals at those schools should be used to offer wisdom to other schools in the LEA about how to

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succeed on an ongoing basis. Certainly all school turnaround contexts have unique elements to them, but within a single education agency there is wisdom to be shared across schools.

**Central Office Principal Meetings.** The common language and wisdom gleaned through communication at these principal and central office meetings would be valuable for the principals of schools who are not yet designated as chronically underperforming. Principals of all schools we observed were tracking closely their student performance data and several of the schools designated as level C were working hard to find ways of avoiding an eventual level D designation. Explicit communication about how two schools succeeded and how a third failed would be invaluable for these level C principals. Central Office staff can develop an understanding about these different scenarios by looking across what happened at all three schools and sharing the information at these meetings. This data should form the basis of the agency's plan to support not only the newly designated level D school, but also other schools who are struggling to avoid such a designation.

Wisdom gained from these principal and central office meetings would also benefit implementers on the opposite ends of the chain (teachers and school board members) by communicating plans to improve student learning prior to a chronically underperforming designation. Opportunities could be created for teachers from turned around schools to share experiences with the staff in newly designated schools as well as schools that are in danger of falling to this designation. Principals at the level C schools could begin creating shared visions for student success and hopefully improve the academic experience of their current students before an intervention was demanded from the state. Communication should not only focus on the best (and worst) practices but also on helping teachers and school board members to better understand the purpose of turnaround as well as the expectations of their role within the policy.

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**Local Stakeholders Group.** Another recommendation is that the composition of the Local Stakeholders Group (LSG) should be replicated on the school's redesign team. The LSG is composed of members of the community at large, the school board, teachers, and administrators from the school and central office. Some LEA's also include students where developmentally appropriate. The purpose of the LSG is to come up with a list of recommendations for a superintendent as he or she develops the turnaround plan for the local education agency. Once the recommendations are made, however, this group is disbanded. All of the stakeholders on the group continue to be concerned about the well being of their school, but often the school's redesign team does not include anyone from outside the school's staff. Including a representative group of stakeholders similar to the LSG composition would help to increase communication between the different stakeholder groups. Consistent meetings about the progress of the school will help keep everyone informed and could possibly aid in the procurement of resources from the members of this group. Ongoing input and communication within a redesign team with this type of constitution could pose a challenge to the building principal's authority and accountability without a clear understanding of norms, protocols, and expectations for how these meetings should be run. The central office representative and the building principal should be in constant communication over how the group is functioning and revisiting the norms and expectations whenever necessary to ensure the effectiveness of the team.

**Building School Board Capacity.** The need for clearer expectations about the role and responsibility of the school board in an agency's turnaround. This is a specific recommendation for this education agency despite the fact that there are multiple board members who have witnessed the turnaround process in three schools in the LEA. School board members have four areas of authority: budget, policy, evaluation of the superintendent, and collective bargaining. Turnaround legislation has clouded the board's responsibilities. Making sense of the committee's current role requires direct and explicit conversation. We recommend there be dedicated time for a school board workshop on

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turnaround. Professional development for school board members in turnaround LEA's should be explicit, ongoing, and focus on how they support turnaround efforts in the local context. Not only does the board need to be clear on what the policy requires of the local education agency, but they also need a clearer understanding of what their role will be in the turnaround process moving forward. A lot of attention is provided to the other implementer groups to make certain they understand their roles and expectations. We believe giving similar attention to the school board would also help facilitate the process of turning around the agency's underperforming schools.

**Support for Teacher Collaboration.** Collaboration and teamwork are areas that research has shown to contribute to successful school improvement. Some studies have found that relationship building coupled with collaboration between stakeholders is key to raising the level of performance of an underperforming school (Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Duke et al., 2005; Fullan, 2006; Harris, 2006; Mulford et al., 2008; Murphy & Meyers, 2008). A teacher at the turned around school described how teamwork contributed to school improvement this way, "There were horror stories at first, when we all first began... but then as the years went on, there were more success stories rather than horror stories. There were supportive conversations, I mean, we got a good laugh, no doubt about it, from all the craziness that did occur, but in the end it was supportive because it ended up making us a family." This aligns with what literature on effective school leadership says about building teamwork as an essential element in any school striving to improve (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Scribner et al., 2011). It is important to recognize that people are the most important resource in an LEA, and that they are not merely vessels to hold new information about data use or new student discipline programs. They need time together to get to know each other so that they can provide internal support for one another as things get hard and then continue to be hard in the turnaround process. We know a turned around school benefits any neighborhood it is in, but it cannot fix all the ills faced by today's urban and rural poor. Problems will persist well beyond improved student results. The only way the people in these schools

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can also persist is as members of a committed team who continually communicate with each other. Staff must constantly be given time and opportunity to work together so they don't feel isolated while working in this difficult environment.

### **Recommendation Two: Specify a transparent process for allocating resources**

It is our hope that ensuring a transparent process for school resource allocation will result in increased equity and fairness and thereby increase trust between implementers. By building trust implementers can work together more cooperatively and effectively, further ensuring that the capacity and collective efficacy developed during the turnaround process can be sustained. Additionally, further development of resource support by pre-identifying struggling schools and perhaps preempting them, may prevent the number of level D schools in the LEA and the need for drastic interventions.

**Key Elements for Implementing Recommendations.** As limited resources are available in the LEA, the criteria and priorities about how resources are distributed to specific programs and schools needs to be developed. By establishing a baseline for best practices for school improvement, all implementer groups, including school board, superintendent/central office, principals, and teachers can self-assess the impact of their actions and decisions in relation to student achievement. The LEA should consider the individual needs of schools and school context to identify how each school implements these baseline practices using the school review partner process. After implementers come to a consensus about the needs of the school and the next steps for intervention, the LEA should consider a way to measure school resource usage after they are distributed, and how to incorporate a research function in the process of deciding how to allocate resources.

**Funding.** The LEA, like many others throughout the state, is grappling with maintaining services for students in the face of dwindling tax revenues, increased student needs and services, and the funding cliff derived from the expiration of Race to the Top (RTTT) and other grant funds. All implementer



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groups interviewed acknowledged that they did not believe they had enough resources to meet the needs of students. To sustain student achievement gains and teacher efficacy, the LEA should develop a comprehensive plan that prioritizes programming and initiatives that will remain or be curtailed when current funding streams diminish. Additionally, multiple implementer groups interviewed discussed that funding support is only available to Level D schools, thereby unintentionally incentivizing Level D status. Define a framework for resource allocation based on school level, programming, and student needs. This framework should include details of funding streams for academic and extracurricular programs, additional pay for teachers, full-time equivalents, and other areas essential to effective implementation of turnaround policy.

**Human Resources.** It is recommended that the LEA streamline and replicate the most successful process for teacher “opt-out” of level D schools to ensure consistency of implementation across schools. This would include providing principals with explicit professional development on assessing the “fit” of instructional staff members utilizing pre-determined LEA best practices from past “opt-out” rounds. Implementing a consistent process across schools that fosters trust, facilitates transparency, and diminishes misalignment between policy implementer groups may assist with the goal of keeping all implementer groups ultimately focused on achieving LEA and school goals.

**Time.** We recommend that the LEA provide a plan for sustainability to ensure continuity of teacher common planning time and extended learning time services to students. Teachers in level D schools interviewed feel that they can successfully effectuate change and meet the needs of students due to the additional collaboration and extended learning time (ELT) opportunities. While complete replication and scalability may prove challenging, provide educators with opportunities to learn from ELT schools to develop best practices that can be adapted in schools lacking resources to pay all teachers for ELT.

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The LEA should assess the delivery of support and monitoring across high priority (level D, and C) schools by Central Office administration. A system to monitor school-level support from central office administrators will ensure clear and equitable support and monitoring. This would assuage the concerns of teachers and principals that level D schools receive the most attention and support and counter their stated view that they have to let their schools become “worse” before they receive attention and support.

### **Recommendation Three: Increase the capacity of implementers to work with data.**

An area identified in our findings across implementer groups was the use of data. How data was used (or not used) was one of the most talked-about areas for school improvement by teachers, school leaders, central office personnel, and school board members. In this LEA, data use goes beyond merely examining assessment results to know what schools are eligible for turnaround support. Rather, educators used the data to tell them what areas of school improvement need focus and how to improve instruction. This is consistent with literature that says data is a key in school improvement efforts. Specifically, data is needed to guide instruction, which is essential to improving performance in underperforming schools. It allows educators to measure student progress towards goals, and it helps to pinpoint instructional strengths and weaknesses (Clubine et al., 2001). Indeed, the use of data to guide decisions is considered a condition for successful school improvement (Potter et al., 2002; Corallo & MacDonald, 2001) and this LEA makes data an integral part of their turnaround efforts. The data use in this LEA rests on implementers’ ability to make sense of, or analyze, it, and it is that analysis that guides improvement efforts. For teachers, improvement is about their instruction. For principals, it is about the school as a whole, and for central office personnel, it is about the LEA as a whole. The implementer group that is not directly involved with this level of data analysis is the school board. In fact, the school board seems to have significantly less interaction with the data, which eclipses their ability to engage in understanding improvement efforts in the LEA.

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Although data is a significant part of school and LEA improvement planning, findings point to inconsistencies with the level of comfort and ability of different implementers to analyze data. For example, whereas some teachers have facility with data analysis, others feel less comfortable working with it. This seemed to relate to the phase of the school's turnaround efforts. At the school that successfully went through the turnaround process, teachers typically were adept at using the data to inform their practice. On the other hand, in those schools that were at the beginning of turnaround, teachers tended to have less experience with data analysis. Similarly, school board members appeared to have minimal experience with looking at school achievement data and often expressed the desire for better understanding. The implementer groups who worked the most with the data were school leaders and central office personnel. This is notable because it marks key leverage points for increasing capacity to use data across the LEA. Our recommendation is to increase capacity so that there is more consistency in terms of how implementers understand and use the data.

**Ways to Develop Capacity to Work with Data.** The LEA has strengths they can build on to increase the capacity of implementers to use data. Building and LEA leaders, along with numerous teachers, understand the importance of using data and prioritize its role in school improvement. There is at least one school in the LEA where data was made central to its improvement efforts and in the end, was successfully turned around. There is an understanding among school board members that data is relevant to school LEA improvement and recognition of the need to use it in their role as representatives of the community. While this LEA has already begun paying attention to data in its LEA improvement efforts, there are a few key actions that can help to increase the capacity of all implementers to use data that is consistent across schools and across implementer groups. Central office administrators would need to take the lead in providing opportunities for implementers of the turnaround process to engage in quality data analysis in order to lead to more informed and strategic decisions about school improvement.

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**School leaders and teachers collaborating around data.** One opportunity to build capacity for analyzing data among teachers is to bring them together to share data analysis practices. While teachers interact with other teachers in their own schools, and perhaps informally with teachers in other schools, more formal structures could allow this to occur more frequently. Collaboration is a key element in turnaround. That is, successful turnaround often depends on the level of collaboration by teachers centered on instruction and problem solving (Harris, 2002; Picucci et al., 2002; Leithwood et al., 2010; Duke et al., 2005; Clubine et al., 2001). Providing teachers with opportunities to collaborate across schools around data would increase their contact with other teachers around best practices and provide new ideas and ways of using data to inform their instruction.

Sharing of best practices can also occur among school leaders. Currently, school leaders in the LEA meet with LEA personnel, along with members of their faculty, to analyze data in their data review meetings. In addition, there are LEA level meetings that occur with central office, including the superintendent, and principals of all the schools in the LEA. Findings suggest, however, that there is some inconsistency in how school leaders in this LEA lead data analysis with their staff and use that analysis to improve practice. There is an opportunity here for school leaders to work together to develop their own skills not only about data analysis for school improvement, but also about how to lead their staff through the turnaround process.

**Increasing community understanding of the data.** Developing better understanding of the data in this LEA also involves the community. This begins with the school board to promote their sense-making of the data. Findings suggest that school board members have little interaction with data and less experience than the educators in the schools with making sense of data in a way that helps them understand the turnaround work. School board members could be provided with more opportunities to examine the data to increase their understanding. These conversations do not need to be overly cumbersome in detail. Rather, they might give an overview of what the data is saying about the LEA and

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why designations occur. This would put school board members in a better position to communicate with their constituencies about the turnaround work that is happening in the LEA. With a greater understanding of the data, they can dialogue with community members about why some schools are designated as turnaround schools based on their academic performance. Furthermore, the LEA can work in tandem with the school board on outreach to the community. Working together, they could provide settings for dialogues to take place between the LEA and the community about the data. While school board meetings is perhaps a likely place for this, and our research indicated that indeed discussions around data have occurred there, opportunities offered outside the context of a school board meeting may be beneficial. In the end, this may lead to a more informed community who understand what the data means in terms of the LEA's performance.

### **Recommendation Four: Communicate a clear vision of leadership for the LEA**

As we listened to what each of the implementers were saying about turnaround, it became clear that they were looking at turnaround differently and focusing on different aspects of the turnaround process. They were also expressing different priorities about what needed to be done to improve the schools. At times, they noted their own lack of clarity about how to turn around their schools. There appeared to be a lack of interdependence among the different implementer groups. That is, they tended to operate in silos, distinct from each other, and often not in tune to what other implementers were thinking or doing with the turnaround work.

There were several places where this lack of interdependence was apparent. The interviews conducted brought out the most pressing questions and understandings of each of the implementer groups and at times showed little consistency or connection between each group. Central office directors spoke about the importance of their monitoring role and how they worked with school leaders to put practices in place to improve school performance. Yet, school leaders did not talk much about this and were more focused on how they were working with their staffs. Teachers described a style of leadership

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in their schools at the beginning phase of turnaround that was directive, whereas, when school leaders described their approach, it resembled more of an instructional leadership approach. The school board was knowledgeable about the responsibilities given to them under education reform but they were less clear on their role in turnaround. The other three implementer groups rarely mentioned the school board, indicating that the school board leadership role was not prevalent in their view. These are examples of how the different implementer groups were operating within their own spheres of turnaround work with little connection to each other.

This lack of interdependence may be attributed to the fact that a clear vision from the LEA about what implementers should be thinking and doing to raise school performance was absent. This became apparent when implementers expressed concern about their ability to sustain school success after the turnaround period ends. Their concern was twofold: that they would not be able to continue the work without the additional resources that came with turnaround status and that they did not know their next goal when their turnaround status ended. This suggests that at least some implementers were relying on the policy to set their vision for them. That is, upon designation, their vision was about doing what was necessary to exit turnaround status within a specific timeframe. Implementers did not speak about any kind of long range vision that the LEA set about turnaround. When asked to articulate the LEA's turnaround philosophy many could not identify one with any specificity. Without that vision articulated by the LEA, the vision many implementers adopted seemed to be to reach the policy goals of higher student achievement within a 3-year period. Once that 3-year period ended, some implementers asked "what now?" This is consistent with the finding that the LEA leaders saw the work of turnaround as occurring at the school level, coming from the recognition that the heart of the work is where the students are. However, they did not talk about how they saw the schools as connected with each other as part of a larger LEA network. They did not describe whether they saw the LEA as a system whose parts

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should be working together towards a common vision or how they envisioned the system supporting learning at the building level.

For this LEA, a clear vision of leadership is needed to help guide and sustain school improvement. Although turnaround is a focus of some schools, non-turnaround schools are going through school improvement, some with the aim to avoid level D designation. Therefore, all schools throughout the LEA would benefit from a more clearly articulated vision of leadership. When talking about turnaround leadership at the school building level, Leithwood et al. (2010) emphasize the importance of vision when they recommend turnaround leaders engage their staffs in developing the vision of a school as a source of motivation to commit to the work of school turnaround. They also suggest using that vision to help guide planning and to ensure that all decisions align with school goals. In implementing this suggestion at the LEA level, this LEA would bring implementer groups more into alignment with each other and with the LEA in terms of how they implement turnaround. Fullan (2006) who also focuses on turnaround leadership at the building level, discusses the need to implement systemic reform by using a “tri-level development solution” that includes alignment between the state, LEA, and school.

What has to happen at the school and community level? The [LEA] level? The level of the state...? the idea is to ‘cause’ developments, along lines of this book, within and across the three levels. It is not so much seeking alignment as it is experiencing permeable connectivity—lots of two-way horizontal and vertical mutual influence (p. 74). Establishing this connectivity and alignment requires conversation, face to face interactions and the co-construction of meaning that are integral to the sense-making described by researchers (Weick, 1995; Datnow, 2006). This connectivity needs to happen between all three levels Fullan describes above and requires the state and the LEA to monitor progress on a case by case basis.

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This tri-level development solution aptly describes the importance of connecting the different levels of turnaround, school, community, LEA and state, in terms of how to approach turnaround work. For the purposes of this recommendation, the focus is on the relationship between the LEA, community and the school in that all three need to be working in concert with each other. A vision of leadership in this LEA would strengthen those relationships and help to create the interdependence needed for implementers of turnaround policy to be working in the same direction. Strengthening the interdependence between implementer groups can also be reinforced by making sure that all voices are represented including dissenting voices. Creating a common vision would not be about merely exiting or avoiding turnaround status. Rather, it would be about the kinds of educational experiences that leadership would create for students that transcend what the turnaround policy mandates. In fact, creating a common vision for the entire LEA would benefit schools at all levels of designation and not just those who have been deemed chronically underperforming. A vision of leadership would help implementers speak the same language about what they need to focus on and what they need to do to increase the quality experiences that result in higher student learning in the entire system.

### **Conclusion**

This research generated insights into what educators in this LEA think and do as they implement turnaround policy. Emerging from these insights are recommendations that are intended to enhance the turnaround work that is already happening across schools in this LEA. Because sense-making relies so heavily on communication, increasing communication is suggested here as a way to facilitate understanding of turnaround policy. Yet, this understanding goes beyond knowing the policy requirements. Communication can help educators in the LEA better understand their role and expectations, which are not necessarily outlined in the policy. This enhances the process of co-construction as implementers' communication with each other helps them to make meaning. Also recommended is to specify a transparent process for allocating resources. This LEA makes decisions



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about how resources are distributed across schools and programs. Yet, the findings from this research study suggest that there is some confusion as to how those decisions are made. Clarifying these decisions would help to alleviate confusion and increase trust in the process, which can then help to guide implementers' decisions about turnaround implementation. The third recommendation about data use comes from a major theme which emerged across the individual studies about the prevalence of data in school improvement planning and implementation. This LEA already uses data, but there are some inconsistencies in the capacity of implementers to analyze and use data. School leaders, central office personnel, and teachers, would benefit from collaborative opportunities for work with data. School board members may need more experience with data in order to communicate with their constituencies about what the data says about the schools in the LEA. Providing more opportunities for implementers to work with data would not only help with school improvement efforts, but it would also help the community of this LEA to better understand the data that informs turnaround work in their schools.

These recommendations aim to outline how this LEA can increase its capacity to exercise successful turnaround of its chronically underperforming schools. Increased communication can lead to more sense-making, which can help to guide turnaround implementation decisions. More transparency about the way resources are distributed can offer guidance to implementers throughout the LEA about how to approach turnaround work. Increasing capacity to analyze and use data would inform decisions that successfully leads to school improvement. As with most advice about school improvement, this is not offered as a universal remedy to this LEA's turnaround challenges. Rather, these recommendations are intended to enhance the thinking that goes into school improvement planning and implementation. That is, these suggestions can help implementers make sound decisions about what they should do when taking on the immense task of turning around a chronically underperforming school.

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**Appendix A: Definition of Terms**

**NCLB** - No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which is the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

**Blueprint for Reform** - The Blueprint for Reform is President Obama's 2010 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

**RTTT** - Race to the Top is a grant program designed to spur innovation and reform in the nation's K-12 schools. It is funded by the Education Recovery Act, which is part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

**SIG** - School Improvement Grant. This is a federal grant program authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. They are grants to State Education Agencies (SEAs) used for competitive grants to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) that demonstrate the greatest need and the strongest commitment to use the funds to provide adequate resources in order to rapidly and dramatically improve student achievement in their lowest-performing schools.

**Turnaround legislation** - State legislation from 2010 whose stated purpose is to provide innovation in schools and to turnaround underperforming schools. It was written in part to respond to the federal requirement that states wishing to qualify for RTTT funds needed to have their own legislation outlining school improvement requirements that was in line with President Obama's Blueprint for Reform.

**SRG** - School Redesign Grants is a SEA program from SIG that offers competitive grants to intervene in the lowest performing local LEA's in the state.

**Level C and D and F School Designation** - State schools in the lowest 20% relative to other schools in their grade span are designated level C. Schools that are the lowest performing from the level C group

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are those eligible to be designated as level D schools. Not more than 4% of the total number of public schools in (the state under study) can be designated as level D. Level F schools are designated for state takeover.

**Local Stakeholder group** - Upon being designated a level D school the Superintendent has 30 days within which they must convene a stakeholders group whose task it will be to make recommendations to the Superintendent for the Turnaround Plan.

**Turnaround plan** - written by the Superintendent of the LEA based on the recommendations from the Local Stakeholders group, this plan must be submitted to the SEA for review by the Commissioner who may choose to approve the plan for up to three years. The plan must include specific steps and timelines outlined by the state. The plan is designed to be a template for applications for SRG application.

**School redesign team** - the job of the school redesign team is to use the Superintendent's turnaround plan to create a three-year redesign plan that will serve as the day-to-day roadmap for implementation. The redesign team is also tasked with overseeing the operation of the plan and making adjustments based on data and results as needed.

**School redesign plan** - is the plan written by the school redesign team to serve as the actual implementation of the Superintendent's Turnaround Plan. It may include applying for an SRG and serves in place of the School Improvement Plan (SIP).

**Policy implementers** - for the purpose of this research study the policy implementers studied will be limited to members of the school board, central office, the building principal, and teachers.

### **Four Models of the Federal Redesign Grants**

1) **Turnaround** - Up to 50% of the staff is excised and a new principal is brought on board to turn around the underperforming school.

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2) **Restart** - school composition is changed by the LEA and may be taken over by an External Management Organization (EMO), often a charter school.

3) **School Closure** - the school is closed and the remaining students are dispersed to other schools within the LEA.

4) **Transformation** - the LEA attempts to meet the demands for improved student gains under its current staff and student configuration.

**Appendix B: Code Lists****Start List of Codes**

Assessments (ASM):
Central Office (CO)
Challenge (CHA)
Collaboration (COL)
Communication: (COM)
Context: (CON)
Equity (EQ)
Factors: (FAC)
Implementer Responsibility and Roles (IMRR)
Making Sense (MS)
Policy Implementation Results (PIRE)
Political (POL)
Principals (PR)
Prior Knowledge: (PRK)
Reflection (RFLC)
Relationship (REL)



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Resistance (RES)
School board (SC)
Social (SOC)
Student Impact (SIM)
Support (SPT)
Sustainability (SUS)
Teachers (TCH)
Trust (TRU)
Use of data (USD)

### List of Actual Codes (Parent and Child Codes Included)

<p>Communication between Implementers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Superintendent to Central Office</li> <li>• School Leader to Teacher</li> <li>• School Committee to Superintendent</li> <li>• Superintendent to School Leaders</li> <li>• Between Implementers</li> </ul>
<p>Culture/values and beliefs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culture change</li> <li>• Trust</li> </ul>
<p>Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of resources</li> <li>• equity of distribution</li> <li>• use of resources</li> <li>• resources to support turnaround</li> </ul>

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<p>Leadership Behaviors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• instructional leadership</li><li>• distributed leadership</li><li>• hiring/staffing</li><li>• directive leadership</li><li>• shared vision</li><li>• support/guidance</li></ul>
<p>Collaboration</p>
<p>Sense-making turnaround process</p> <p>sense-making of ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• policy requirements</li><li>• data</li><li>• chronic of underperforming contributing factors</li><li>• state intervention</li><li>• expectations</li><li>• directives</li><li>• roles</li></ul>
<p>Attitude about turnaround</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• motivation</li><li>• perceived barriers to implementation</li><li>• perceived support for implementation</li></ul>
<p>Policy Implementation Results</p>
<p>Political</p>
<p>Capacity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• community</li><li>• internal</li></ul>
<p>Co-construction</p>

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Context
Data use <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• data to inform PD</li><li>• to assess educator performance</li><li>• to initiate change</li><li>• to inform instruction</li><li>• to identify strengths and weaknesses</li><li>• to understand designation</li></ul>
Re-construction
Social capital
Implementer voice <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• dissenter voice</li></ul>
Sustainability

## **Appendix C: Consent to Participate in Interview**

Boston College Lynch School of Education

Informed Consent for Participation as a Subject in: Turning Around Schools: A View From the Stakeholders: A study that examines how stakeholder sense-making of turnaround policy influences the planning and implementation of turnaround goals.

Investigators: Jamie B. Chisum, Anna Carollo Cross, Jill Geiser, and Charles Grandson. PSAP Ed.D. Class of 2014

### **Introduction:**

You are being asked to participate in a research study of the process stakeholders in turnaround LEA's go through to make sense of how to implement turnaround policies. You are being asked to participate because you have a role in the LEA that is directly involved in the implementation of LEA policies in a turnaround LEA. Please read this and feel free to ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be a participant in the study.

**Type of Consent:** Adult Consent

### **Purpose of study**

The purpose of this study is to examine how stakeholders (school board members, central office personnel, principals and teachers) in turnaround LEA's understand and make sense of their roles in the implementation of turnaround policies.

The total number of participants in the study is expected to be 10-20.

Members of the research team do not have any financial interest in the study.

### **Description of the Study Procedures**

If you agree to be a participant in this study, you will be agreeing to participate in a 1-1 ½ hour on site in-person interview or in a location that is mutually agreeable. In addition, if you choose to do so, you

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will be given the opportunity to review the interview transcript for accuracy; it is estimated that this will take approximately ½ hour.

### **Risks/Discomforts, Benefits of Being in the Study**

There are no reasonably foreseeable risks to participation. There are no direct benefits to you from participating in the study. However, the findings may be useful to LEA personnel, school board members, and members of the State Departments of Education responsible for communicating or implementing turnaround policies. Understanding the factors that influence the implementation of turnaround policies may raise awareness about how different stakeholders view their roles in the process. You have been selected to participate in this study as an implementer of turnaround policy.

### **Payments/Costs/Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating. There are no payments to you, nor costs to you to participate in the study.

### **Confidentiality**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. If any published reports are produced as a result of this study, researchers will make every effort to omit or disguise information that may be used to directly identify a participant. All researchers will keep electronic information in a password protected computer file. Audio tape recordings will be held by the individual interviewer until a transcription has been completed and confirmed for accuracy. Those interview recordings will then be destroyed.

Access to the records will be limited to the researchers; however, please be aware that the Institutional Review Board and internal Boston College auditors may review the research records.

### **Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal**

Your participation is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect your current or future relations with the University. You are free to withdraw at any time for whatever reason. There is no penalty or loss of benefits for not taking part or for stopping your participation. If any significant findings emerge during the course of the research study that may affect your continued participation you will be notified immediately and the decision to withdraw or continue will be yours. In addition, you may refuse to answer individual questions but continue with participation in the study at any point during the interview process.

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### **Dismissal From the Study**

The investigator(s) may withdraw you from the study at any time for the following reasons: (1) withdrawal is in your best interests, (2) you have failed to comply with the study requirements, or (3) the study is terminated.

### **Contacts and questions**

The researchers conducting this study are current doctoral students in the PSAP Ed.D program at Boston College: Jamie Chisum, Anna Carollo Cross, Jill Geiser, Charles Grandson

For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact a member of the research team:

Anna Carollo Cross (508) 875-7851 [anna.cross@bc.edu](mailto:anna.cross@bc.edu)

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact: Director, Office for Research Protections, Boston College at (617) 552-4778, or [irb@bc.edu](mailto:irb@bc.edu)

### **Copy of Consent Form**

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records and future reference.

### **Statement of Consent**

I have read the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to participate in this study. I have received (or will receive) a copy of this form.

### **Signatures/Dates**

Study Participant (Print Name)\_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature\_\_\_\_\_Date\_\_\_\_\_

### **Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

We will be interviewing policy implementers in our single case study LEA. We will focus on our stakeholder groups (Teachers, Principals, Central Office Administrators, School board Members).

The interview process will begin by having the interviewer go over the consent form and give a brief biography of him or herself in order to disclose any areas of potential biases.

#### Background Questions:

1. How long have you been in the LEA? (member of the community)
2. How long have you been at this school? (serving as a school board, central office)
3. How long have you been in your current role?
4. What is your role?

#### Sense-making

5. What was going through your mind when you first learned that the school/LEA was designated level D?

Probe: Did you see any specific concerns or advantages?

6. Did you know it was a possibility? Why?
7. What does the “turnaround plan”(redesign) mean to you?

Probe: Why do you think that? Where did you get that from?

How did you find out about the turnaround plan or planning process?

8. What do you think the LEA is being asked to do to implement the turnaround plan?

Probe: What steps has the LEA taken to implement the turnaround plan?

To implement the turnaround plan what have the principal/teachers/school board members/superintendent done?

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9. Who do you think is responsible for communicating the requirements of the turnaround plan to you?

Probe: Who actually has communicated it to you?

10. Who do you talk to when you have questions about school turnaround?

Probe: Where do those conversations take place?

Are there any other places you get information?

Do people share common understandings about the plan?

How does that make you feel?

11. Did you have conversations with colleagues about data before the designation?

Probe (if yes): Can you describe those conversations? What did you talk about?

How did you talk about it?

12. What is the school/organization turnaround philosophy?

Probe: what does that mean?

### Policy Implementation

13. Who do you think is responsible for understanding the turnaround plan?

Probe: How does that understanding look for teachers, principals, central office and school board?

14. What is your role in the turnaround process? Is this role different now than it was before your school became a turnaround school?

Probe: If new to the school or new to the role adjust the question.

15. Has your thinking about your role changed since pre-designation?

16. What changes have you observed since the LEA/school was designated a level D school?

Probe: Changes in teachers, leadership, community, staff, culture?

How would describe the leadership strategy here now and how that is different from before?

17. How have these changes affected you? (personally, behavior, professionally)

Probe: What changes have you seen in other people around you?



## Appendix E: Interview Guide

### Notes to Interviewer

This interview guide is meant to provide tips for effective interviewing based on the work of Seidman (2006). “Listening is the most important skill in interviewing. The hardest work for many interviewers is to keep quiet and to listen actively” (Seidman, 2006, p. 78).

Listen for:

- *substance*: pay attention to the details of what you are hearing to make sure it is as complete as you want it to be
- *inner voice*: probe for the thoughts or feelings that may be expressed under the words that are being spoken
- *process*: listen for substance but remain aware of time, nonverbal cues, pacing and participant fatigue
- Be flexible, ask questions in a different order or skip if the area has already been discussed.
- Focus on collecting data that answers the research questions
- Stay on topic
- Ask follow-up questions that enrich or clarify
- Explore topics if they will add to understanding
- Ask open ended questions, ask participants to “reconstruct” rather than to remember the situations exactly
- Trust your instincts
- Value silence for participant reflection and thoughtfulness
- Don’t rush
- Don’t answer questions for the interviewee.

**Appendix F: Interview Script**

Thank you for participating in today's interviews.

My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am one of four Boston College Doctoral students working on a research study for our final dissertation.

I'd like to explain the study before we begin.

*We are researching the question of how individuals in turnaround LEA's make sense of the policies they are being asked to implement.*

At the end of this study we will be preparing a report that will be made available to you if you would like.

Would you like to receive a copy?

YES/NO

Your email? \_\_\_\_\_

We will be conducting interviews as a team. We will be interviewing principals, central office staff, teachers and school board members, approximately 30 individuals.

We will be asking 24 questions of all participants. It will take about 55-60 minutes.

The information you share with us today will be confidential. If we do use a quote in the report, it will not be attributed to any particular person. If there are any questions you would like to skip or you would like to stop the interview at any time please let us know. If you have any questions or concerns that you would like to share before we begin the interviews we can stop at this point. Any questions?

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One of us will be taking notes during the interviews. We will also be taping the interview to make sure we can transcribe your words and comments as accurately as possible. Again we want to assure you that all your responses will be confidential. Shall we begin?

Thank you. Let's begin with the first question.

**Appendix G: Observation Protocol**

Observational Field Notes

Setting:

Role of Observer

Time:

Length of Observation:

Description of Event/Object	Reflective Notes